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The Royal Liverpool
and Broadgreen
University Hospitals
NHS Trust

Patient information

Otitis Externa

Ear Nose and Throat Speciality

What is Otitis Externa?

It is inflammation or infection to the outer ear or ear canal, which can spread as far as the eardrum.

What are the symptoms?

They can involve pain, itching, redness and swelling. The ear canal can be blocked with discharge or debris such as wax, moisture and flakes of skin. Swelling and debris in the ear canal may temporarily reduce your hearing in the affected ear.

What are the causes of Otitis Externa?

Often no cause is found for Otitis Externa. However causes can include:

- Skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis can occur in the ear.
- Swimming or getting water in your ears can introduce infection.
- Allergies to shampoo, hairsprays and other toiletries can also cause irritation.

Your ear canal is very sensitive and can be damaged by cleaning with cotton buds, hairclips and matches.

Treatment

The nurse or doctor will clean your ear of any debris that may be present. This allows the treatment to have contact with the infected/ inflamed ear canal.

A dressing (a very small bandage) may be put into your ear canal. This bandage contains an ointment, which contains antibiotic, anti-inflammatory and anti-fungal properties that will treat your ear condition.

While this dressing is in place, your hearing in that ear may be reduced. If a dressing is not used, you may be given eardrops or an ear spray. Both treatments should stop the infection and reduce the swelling.

If you feel that the dressing or drops have made you feel worse, please remove the dressing or stop using the drops. Please contact your family doctor (GP) or phone ENT Ear Care on Tel: 0151 706 3534 Textphone Number: 18001 0151 706 3534 Or ENT Nurse Practitioners Tel: 0151 7062290 Textphone Number: 18001 0151 706 2290 for advice.

Your ear may begin to feel better quickly. However, treatment needs to be regular and should continue until your doctor or nurse tells you that your ear is completely better.

Painkillers (such as paracetamol) and anti-inflammatory tablets will help with your ear pain. It is important to speak to your own GP or chemist before taking any medication to make sure they are okay for you to take.

Prevention

Wax is a normal product of a healthy ear - it is not dirty. Ears are normally self-cleaning and you do not need to clean inside. If you do produce excessive wax, a little clean vegetable oil (olive oil or almond oil) will keep the wax soft. The wax may then come out by itself, or you could contact your GP to have your ears syringed.

Important points to remember

Never have your ears syringed if you have had ear surgery, a perforated eardrum or if advised not to by your ENT specialist. Only healthy ears can be syringed.

Do not clean, scratch or poke your ears. Cotton buds for instance can damage the delicate skin of your ear, which may then become infected. You could also perforate your eardrum.

If you are prone to Otitis Externa then keep your ears dry when swimming or having a bath or shower. You can do this by using a large piece of cotton wool 'mashed' in Vaseline in your ear, 'blue tac' moulded into a hearing aid shape or by using well fitting earplugs.

Although the above points are very helpful in preventing Otitis Externa, it may re-occur.

Further information

Ear, Nose and Throat Ear Care Clinic

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