



Aquatic Consulting Services

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Pool Tip #26: Swimmer's Ear

Swimmer's ear (otitis externa) is an inflammatory disease of the auricle or skin of the outer ear. Some people, particularly children and individuals with allergies, are prone to ear infections. *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *proteus vulgaris*, staph and strep infections are the pathogens most likely to cause pool water related ear infections.

The likelihood of getting an ear infection is based on four factors: water temperature, length of exposure, the amount of moisture retained in the ear canal, and the presence of bacteria in the water. Chlorine changes the ear canal lining from slightly acidic to alkaline. Ear wax and the protective lipid film coating are washed out of the ear by pool water. The resulting laceration of the skin encourages bacterial and fungal growth.

Symptoms may not appear for several hours or even for a couple of days after exposure. Symptoms of ear infection can include: mild to moderate pain, low grade fevers, itching, discharge from the ear, throbbing, a swollen ear canal, or partial hearing loss.

To prevent or lessen the frequency of swimmer's ear, swim in a properly maintained swimming pool, and try to keep water from entering or remaining in your ears. Wear a bathing cap pulled down over your ears. Use earplugs. Dry your ears thoroughly after leaving the pool with a towel or hair dryer. Jumping up and down and shaking your head to dislodge trapped water works too.

If you've already developed a case of swimmer's ear and need to relieve the pain, try applying dry heat. Use antibacterial eardrops, which are a combination of alcohol to reduce moisture and boric acid or vinegar to return the ear canal to an acidic state and slow bacterial growth and the spread of infection. See your doctor if the pain persists, or starts to get worse.