

# Otitis Externa

## What is "otitis externa"?

**Inflammation** of the external ear canal, and sometimes the top of the ear (pinna).

**Acute:** less than 6 weeks duration, typically caused by bacterial infection

**Chronic:** longer than 3 months, may be caused by fungal infection

## What are the symptoms?

- Itchy ear canal
- Ear **pain** and tenderness, especially the tragus and top of the ear (pinna) with possible jaw pain
- Ear **discharge**
- Usually rapid onset within **48h**
- Less often - **hearing loss**



## How is it treated?

For acute otitis externa, options include:

- **Acetic acid 2%** ear drops or spray for 7 days
- **Topical antibiotics**, with or without a corticosteroid, for 7-14 days: such as neomycin sulphate with corticosteroid
- **Oral antibiotics** for 7 days if you are immunocompromised, there is severe infection or it has spread beyond the ear canal: such as flucloxacillin or clarithromycin

If **fungal** infection is suspected, you may be offered:

- **Topical antifungals:** such as clotrimazole 1% solution, to continue for at least 14 days after the infection has resolved; or clioquinol and a corticosteroid for 7-10 days

If there is **no obvious fungal or bacterial infection** but there is inflammation, you may be offered:

- **Topical corticosteroids:** such as prednisolone or betamethasone ear drops

## How can I help myself?

- Avoid ear **trauma** (e.g. cotton buds to clear ear wax)
- Keep the ear **clean and dry**
  - Avoid swimming and water sports for at least 7-10 days during treatment
  - Use ear plugs and/or a tight-fitting cap when swimming
  - Keep shampoo, soap, and water out of the ear when bathing and showering, e.g. by using ear plugs or cotton wool with vaseline
  - Consider using a hairdryer (on the lowest heat setting) to dry the ear canal after washing, bathing or swimming
- Can use over-the-counter acetic acid 2% ear spray if aged 12 or over (**EarCalm**) and pain relief such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or a warm flannel
- Read the following patient information leaflets:



[www.patient.info/ears-nose-throat-mouth/earache-ear-pain/ear-infection-otitis-externa](http://www.patient.info/ears-nose-throat-mouth/earache-ear-pain/ear-infection-otitis-externa)



[www.nhs.uk/conditions/ear-infections](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ear-infections)

## When should I seek further help?

- The infection is **spreading**
- Symptoms are **not improving** within 2 to 3 days
- Symptoms have **not fully resolved** after 2 weeks of starting initial treatment
- Your ear is too **blocked** for topical treatment to work effectively
- There is **swelling** and **redness** behind the ear