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HOW TO PREVENT SWIMMER'S EAR & OTHER CAUSES OF EAR PAIN

Our ears are essential for daily life, constantly collecting and transmitting soundwaves to the brain for interpretation. But hearing isn't our ears' only purpose. Properly-functioning ears can also pinpoint a sound's location, distinguish familiar voices in a crowd, and maintain a person's balance and equilibrium thanks to the movement of fluid through the inner ear, according to the [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#) (ASHA). So, when your ears are on the fritz, it's understandably distressing.



If you're wondering what's causing your ear pain or how to prevent ear problems such as swimmer's ear, hearing loss, or exostosis, this post is for you. Our comprehensive guide to ear ailments contains everything you need to know about caring for your ears in and out of the pool.

SWIMMER'S EAR

What is Swimmer's Ear?

Also referred to as *otitis externa*, swimmer's ear is one of the most common water-induced health problems, affecting water-exercisers, triathletes, fitness swimmers, and children alike. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that [swimmer's ear patients account for at least 2.4 million doctor visits](#) and nearly 500 million dollars in healthcare costs annually.

You might assume that swimmer's ear is the same as a run-of-the-mill ear infection – the kind you had when you were a kid. But middle ear infections are caused by viruses or fluid buildup, whereas swimmer's ear is caused by contaminated water that becomes trapped in the ear, leading to pain, swelling, or discharge. You might also experience swimmer's ear symptoms such as fever, swollen glands, redness in or around the ear opening, or a "full" sensation in the inner ear. If you can move your outer ear without experiencing any pain, you probably don't have swimmer's ear, according to the CDC. But, just like a typical childhood ear infection, swimmer's ear can lead to hearing loss and cartilage damage if left untreated.

Treating Swimmer's Ear

For swimmer's ear infections that are caught early, [ear plugs for swimming](#) or bathing. You should also avoid swimming in untreated or unclean water and discontinue the use of Q-tips in the ears. Cotton swabs simply compact dirt and earwax, creating a more hospitable environment for the bacteria that causes ear infections.

EAR TUBES

What Are Ear Tubes?

Ear tubes are tiny cylindrical devices inserted through the ear drum to allow air to flow into the inner ear. Children who suffer from recurring ear infections, speech delays, fluid retention, or behavioral problems are all candidates for ear tubes.

You might also hear them referred to as pressure equalization tubes, myringotomy tubes, or tympanostomy tubes. No matter what you call them, they're remarkably common. The AAO-HNSF reports that [ear tube surgeries are the most routine medical procedure for children](#) aged one to three, with more than 500,000 procedures performed annually.

Can You Swim With Ear Tubes?

The answer is an unequivocal "yes". Though doctors often recommend that children with ear tubes avoid getting water in their ears while swimming or bathing, [formal recommendations](#) published in 2013 by the AAO-HNSF suggest that "clinicians should not encourage routine, prophylactic water precautions (use of earplugs, headbands; avoidance of swimming or water sports) for children with tympanostomy tubes." That's because swimming in clean, well-maintained water poses little risk to children with ear tubes. Thanks to the tube's tiny opening and water's surface tension, liquid doesn't simply flow through the tube into the inner ear.

Despite official guidelines, recent research conducted by the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh indicates that there is a small, but statistically-significant, [increase in ear infection episodes among children who don't wear ear protection](#) while swimming. So, if your child will be playing in untreated or unclean water (think: lakes, rivers, blow-up pools), wearing an [earband](#) or earplugs for swimming may help to curb the incidence of ear infection. Ear plugs are also ideal for washing your child's hair since soapy water is more viscous and therefore more likely to pass through your child's ear tube.

Ear Plugs for Ear Tubes

If your child will be [swimming with ear tubes](#), any waterproof ear plug will prevent water from entering your child's ear canal. A [moldable ear plug](#) is ideal for younger children to manipulate and put in their own ears; pre-shaped varieties are best for older children with ear tubes because they're a bit more difficult to situate in the ear. Moldable plugs are only good for about 5 uses before becoming soiled or losing their malleability while pre-molded ear plugs can be washed and reused time and time again.

This article is an informational resource and should not be construed as medical advice. Always speak with your ENT doctor or family physician before making any health-related decisions.