**+Otitis externa: causes and treatment**

**What is otitis externa?**

It is inflammation and infection of the ear canal, usually caused by skin allergies, eczema or scratches and abrasions. Treatment with ear drops is usually effective.

**What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms include itching, pain, discharge, temporary dulled hearing.

**What is the treatment for otitis externa?**

* Ear drops or sprays clear most cases of otitis externa. They usually contain an antibiotic to clear the infection, and a steroid to reduce the inflammation and itching. It may take a week or so for symptoms to go completely.

When you use ear drops, we advise you:

* To put drops in the ear as prescribed or advised by your doctor and lie in the required position for 1-2 minutes.
* Press the cartilage at the front of the ear canal a few times to push the drops deep inside the ear canal.
* Several brands of drops are available. If one does not work well then your doctor will advise you to change to another.
* Antibiotic tablets or medicines are sometimes needed in addition to drops, if the infection is severe.

**Further treatment may be needed if the above measures do not work**

* A doctor or nurse may clean the ear canal. Sometimes, gentle suction or syringing is used. This removes the discharge lying in the ear canal.
* Sometimes, a doctor or nurse will place a yellow gauze dressing or a sponge dressing that is soaked in ear drops in the ear canal. This gets the drops right to the end of the ear canal, particularly if it is very swollen.
* A doctor may also take a swab of the discharge to find out which bacteria are causing the infection and which antibiotic to use.
* You are advised to prevent water from entering the ear canal during your treatment. You can do this when showering by placing a piece of cotton wool coated in Vaseline in the outer ear.
* You are advised to continue using ear drops as directed by your doctor - it is important you wash your hands before and after instilling drops.
* It is important to complete antibiotic treatment as directed by your doctor.
* It is important that you avoid cleaning the ear canal with cotton buds as they can further damage the skin and make things worse. Just clean the outside of the ear with a cloth when any discharge appears.

Painkillers like Paracetamol or Ibuprofen may help if pain develops. A hot flannel held against your ear may also help to ease pain.

**Things to look out for:**

* An increased, smelly discharge from your ear;
* Your outer ear becomes very red, inflamed and tender or painful;
* You develop a temperature- feel unwell and feverish;

If you experience any of the above, you need to seek advice from your GP.

**How can I prevent further bouts of otitis externa?**

If you are prone to otitis externa, to help prevent recurrences, we advise that you keep the ears dry and leave them alone! This means:

* Try not to let soap or shampoo get into your ear canal. Use a piece of cotton wool coated in Vaseline in the outer ear while showering.
* Silicone rubber earplugs may be helpful to keep ears dry while swimming.
* Please do not use corners of towels or cotton buds to dry any water that does get in the ear canal. Let it dry naturally.
* Try not to scratch or poke the ear canal with fingers, cotton wool buds, hair grips, pen tops towels, etc.
* Please do not clean the ear canal with cotton buds. They may scratch and irritate, and push wax or dirt further into the ear. The ear cleans itself, and bits of wax will fall out now and then.
* Do not leave balls of cotton wool in the ear canal. This stops the discharge (debris) which needs to come out. However, if the discharge is continuous, then some cotton wool placed loosely in the outer part of the canal may be needed to mop up the discharge. If you use cotton wool, replace it when it becomes soiled**.**