



PATIENT INFORMATION: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Topical Therapy for Acute Otitis Externa (Swimmer's Ear)

Frequently asked questions	Answer
Are eardrops alone sufficient to treat my infection or do I also need to take an antibiotic by mouth?	Eardrops alone are the most effective treatment for AOE and may contain antibiotics, antiseptics, steroids, or a combination. Antibiotics taken by mouth do not kill most germs that cause AOE and should be used only when infection spreads beyond the ear canal, eardrops cannot get into the ear, or the immune system is weak.
Which eardrop is best for treating my ear infection?	All eardrops approved for treating AOE (Table 5) are highly effective with no consistent advantage shown for any one specific drug.
If all eardrops are equally effective why do doctors prescribe different ones?	Your doctor will discuss with you the reasoning behind his or her eardrop recommendation, but some of the factors considered include cost, dosing frequency, status of the eardrum, and the doctor's experience. Your opinion and preferences should also factor into this decision.
Is there anything I should be sure to tell my doctor that might help in deciding which eardrop is best?	Let your doctor know if you had any prior ear surgery, if there is an opening (hole or perforation) of the eardrum, or if an ear tube is in place. If one or more of these conditions apply then your doctor will need to use an eardrop that is approved for use in the middle ear, just in case some of it gets past the eardrum. Also let your doctor know if you have recently used other ear products or medications, or if you have had a reaction in the past to a particular eardrop or antibiotic. Last, tell your doctor if you have, or are suspected to have, diabetes, since this could alter management.
Once I start using the eardrops how long should it take until I feel better?	Most people feel better within 48 to 72 hours and have minimal or no symptoms by 7 days. Notify your doctor if your pain or other symptoms fail to respond within this time frame.
If it usually takes at least 48 hours to feel better from the eardrops what should I do for earlier relief?	Pain medicine is especially important to use for relief in the first few days, until the eardrops begin working. Discuss with your doctor which pain medicines are best for you. Pain-relieving (anesthetic) eardrops are not recommended because they are not intended for use during an active ear canal infection and can mask symptoms of a delayed response to therapy.
For how long will I need to use the eardrops?	Eardrops should be used for at least 7 days, even if you feel better sooner, to prevent relapse of infection. If symptoms persist beyond 7 days you should notify your doctor and continue the drops until the symptoms resolve for a maximum of 7 additional days.

Frequently asked questions	Answer
Are there any activity restrictions or special precautions that will help my ear recover faster?	Avoid scratching or touching the ear and do not insert anything into the ear canal, including cotton-tipped swabs. Cover the opening of ear canal with an earplug or cotton (with petroleum jelly) prior to showering or hair washing to minimize water entry. Check with your doctor regarding swimming or other water activities that may take place during, or soon after, your infection.
Do eardrops have side effects that I should be aware of?	Eardrops are, in general, very safe and well tolerated. Some people report local rash, itching, irritation, or discomfort, but it is rarely bad enough to require stopping the medication. If you taste the eardrops it means there is likely a hole or perforation of the eardrum, so inform your doctor (if you have not already done so). Also call your doctor if the drops become painful or you develop unexpected symptoms.

SOURCE: Clinical Practice Guideline: Acute Otitis Externa. Rosenfeld RM, Schwartz SR, Cannon CR, Roland PS, Simon GR, Kumar KA, Hunag WW, Haskell HW, Robertson PJ. Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg. 2014 Feb; Vol. 150(1S) S1– S24. doi: 10.1177/0194599813517083

About the AAO-HNSF

The American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery (www.entnet.org), one of the oldest medical associations in the nation, represents about 12,000 physicians and allied health professionals who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the ears, nose, throat, and related structures of the head and neck. The Academy serves its members by facilitating the advancement of the science and art of medicine related to otolaryngology and by representing the specialty in governmental and socioeconomic issues. The AAO-HNS Foundation works to advance the art, science, and ethical practice of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery through education, research, and lifelong learning. The organization's vision: "Empowering otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeons to deliver the best patient care."