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Otitis externa, swimmer's ear

Otitis externa is swelling of the outer ear and ear canal. When infected, the ear canal can acutely become very painful and swollen. If untreated, the infection can involve the soft tissues of the face and jaw. Chewing may become painful as well.

Causes abrasions in the ear canal and outer ear
 water exposure
 self-cleaning of the ear canals can cause scratches in the ear canal,
 allowing bacteria to enter breaks in the skin

Symptoms pain, hearing loss, drainage from the ear canal, itchiness of the ear canal

Diagnosis ear canal is red and swollen
 touching the ear can be painful
 on examination, the ear canal is narrow, there may be debris and drainage

Treatment The physician will clear the ear canal of debris and wax. Antibiotic and steroid eardrops may be prescribed. Sometimes, if the ear canal is too swollen to evaluate or to clear the debris entirely, a wick is placed into the ear canal to allow the antibiotic drops to reach the deeper portions of the ear canal.

Prevention Avoid placing anything in the ear canal. Cotton tipped applicators can push wax further into the ear canal. In addition, these can create small scratches and breaks in the skin of the ear canal.

 After prolonged swimming, be sure to dry the ears.

 Avoid swimming in polluted water.

Complications Otitis externa can be severe in diabetic or immunosuppressed patients. In these individuals, prompt examination by an ear nose and throat physician is very important.