

ENJOY SUMMER WITHOUT SWIMMER'S EAR

As summer heats up, many Claremore-area families head to the pool or lake, and while water activities are great for exercise and keeping everyone cool, parents need to be aware of the causes, symptoms, and prevention of a common summertime ailment – swimmer's ear.

An infection of the outer ear structures, also called otitis externa or sometimes "swimmer's ear" is caused by water exposed to the ear canal that has been traumatized. Bacteria that normally inhabit the skin and ear canal can easily multiply, causing infection and irritation.

A normal ear is self-cleaning. Using cotton swabs, for example, changes the pH of the ear canal making the ear susceptible to infections. The wax in the ear is there to provide acidity to the ear canal causing it to shed outward; therefore, does not need to be cleaned. "Cleaning the ear" (q-tips, ear candles, etc) creates trauma to the skin, enabling bacteria and fungi to become problematic. Normally bacteria, fungus, etc., will have no effect on an undamaged outer ear. However, due to exposure to daily water in coordination with an ear canal that has been traumatized sets up possible infection.

The most common symptom of swimmer's ear is itchiness and mild to moderate pain in the ear. Other symptoms may include: a sensation that the ear is blocked or full; drainage; fever; diminished hearing; intense pain that radiates to the neck, face, or side of the head; swollen lymph nodes; or the appearance that the outer ear is pushed forward or away from the skull.

"The best prevention," said Dr. Mark Welch, a board-certified ear, nose and throat specialist, "is to leave your ears alone."

Dr. Welch discourages the use of cotton swabs in the ear, as they may actually pack material deeper into the ear canal. A solution of equal parts alcohol and white vinegar applied to the ears after swimming is an effective tool for evaporating excess water in the ear.

Left untreated, an outer ear infection or "swimmer's ear" can lead to hearing loss.

"Early diagnosis paired with careful drying of the ear canal and eardrops that inhibit bacterial growth are the most effective ways to keep swimmer's ear in check," said Dr. Welch.

Individuals with perforated eardrums and more serious infections should see a board-certified physician like Dr. Welch, who has the specialized equipment and expertise to effectively clean the ear canal and treat the infection.

For more information, please contact the Ear Nose Throat & Allergy Center, where Dr. Welch practices, at 918.341.5088 or go to their web-site www.entallergycenter.com