

SUMMER'S HERE – HOW CAN YOU AVOID SWIMMER'S EAR?

THE ASSOCIATES OF OTOLARYNGOLOGY CAN HELP!

DENVER – The Associates of Otolaryngology are Colorado's exceptional ear, nose and throat specialists. Dr. Christopher Cote and his associates have been helping Coloradans breathe, sleep, and hear better for over 40 years. Today, Dr. Cote discusses swimmer's ear, its causes and symptoms, as well as tinnitus, another serious ear condition.

“Summertime, for obvious reasons, is prime swimmer's ear season...” says Dr. Cote. “It's amazingly easy to get and extremely hard to deal with, so if you suspect you have swimmer's ear, it's important to see a specialist as soon as possible to get treatment started.”

WARNING: If you already have an ear infection, or if you have ever had a perforated or otherwise injured eardrum, or ear surgery, you should consult an ear, nose, and throat specialist before you go swimming and before you use any type of ear drops. If you do not know if you have or ever had a perforated, punctured, ruptured, or otherwise injured eardrum, ask your ear doctor for advice before swimming.

Swimmer's Ear and Its Causes

“Swimmer's ear is an infection of the outer ear structures.” says Dr. Cote. “It typically occurs in swimmers, but the since the cause of the infection is water trapped in the ear canal, bathing or showering may also cause this common infection. When water is trapped in the ear canal, bacteria that normally inhabit the skin and ear canal multiply, causing infection and irritation of the ear canal. If the infection progresses, it may involve the outer ear as well. There are two kinds of swimmer's ear, bacterial or fungal. Bacterial swimmer's ear is very painful and that pain is the indicator of the possible condition. The indicating or starting symptom of fungal swimmer's ear is typically severe itchiness inside the ear. There is also a condition called differential swimmer's ear, which includes other types of ear infections, such as middle-ear or other skin conditions.”

Symptoms Of Swimmer's Ear

- Sensation that the ear is blocked or full

- Drainage

- Fever
- Decreased hearing
- Intense pain that may radiate to the neck, face, or side of the head
- The outer ear may appear to be pushed forward or away from the skull
- Swollen lymph nodes

Treatment Of Swimmer's Ear

Treatment for the early stages of swimmer's ear includes careful cleaning of the ear canal and eardrops that inhibit bacterial growth. Mild acid solutions such as boric or acetic acid are very effective for early infections.

“For more severe infections, if you do not have a perforated ear drum, ear cleaning may be helped by antibiotics. If the ear canal is swollen shut, a sponge or wick may be placed in the ear canal so that the antibiotic drops will be effective. Pain medication may also be prescribed.” remarks Dr. Cote.

Prevention Of Swimmer's Ear

- A dry ear is unlikely to become infected, so it is important to keep the ears free of moisture after swimming or bathing.
- Removable earplugs, sometimes worn for hearing protection, can be used during swimming or bathing to keep moisture out of the ear canal.
- Q-tips should not be used or inserted into the ear canal.
- The safest way to dry your ears out is actually with a hair dryer!
- Alcohol or a 50:50 mixture of alcohol and vinegar used as eardrops will evaporate excess water and keep your ears dry.
- Before using any drops in the ear, it is important to verify with your doctor that you do not have a perforated eardrum or other extenuating circumstances.
- People with itchy ears, flaky or scaly ears, or extensive earwax are more likely to develop swimmer's ear than others.

Tinnitus

Is Ringing in My Ears Normal?

“Not at all.” says Dr. Cote. “Tinnitus is the name for these head noises, and they are very common. Nearly 36 million Americans suffer from this discomfort. Tinnitus may come and go, or you may be aware of a continuous sound. It can vary in pitch from a low roar to a high squeal or whine, and you may hear it in one or both ears. When the ringing is constant, it can be annoying and distracting. More than seven million people are afflicted so severely by tinnitus that they truly cannot lead normal lives.”

Can Other People Hear the Noise in My Ears?

Not usually, but sometimes they are able to hear a certain type of tinnitus. This is called "objective tinnitus," and it is caused either by abnormalities in blood vessels around the outside of the ear or by muscle spasms, which may sound like clicks or crackling inside the middle ear.

What Causes Tinnitus?

- Most tinnitus comes from damage to the microscopic endings of the hearing nerve in the inner ear.
- Advancing age is generally accompanied by a certain amount of tinnitus.
- Frequent exposure to loud noise.
- A small plug of wax in the ear canal.
- A symptom of stiffening of the middle ear bones (otosclerosis).
- Allergies.
- High or low blood pressure.
- Blood circulation problems.
- A tumor.
- Diabetes.
- Thyroid problems.

- Injury to the head or neck.
- Medications such as anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, sedatives, antidepressants, and aspirin.

Tinnitus Treatment

The following list of DO's and DON'Ts can help lessen the severity of tinnitus:

- Avoid exposure to loud sounds and noises.
- Get your blood pressure checked regularly. If it is high, get help to control it.
- Drastically decrease your intake of salt. Salt impairs blood circulation.
- Avoid stimulants such as coffee, tea, cola, and tobacco.
- Exercise daily to improve your circulation.
- Get adequate rest and avoid fatigue.

How Can I Cope With Tinnitus?

Dr. Cote recommends: "Concentration and relaxation exercises can help to control muscle groups and circulation throughout the body. The increased relaxation and circulation achieved by these exercises can reduce the intensity of tinnitus in some patients."

Masking Tinnitus is usually more bothersome in quiet surroundings. A competing sound at a constant low level, such as a ticking clock or radio static (white noise), may mask the tinnitus and make it less noticeable. Products that generate white noise such as nature sounds, etc. are also available through catalogs and specialty stores.

Hearing Aids If you have a hearing loss, a hearing aid(s) may reduce head noise while you are wearing it, and in some cases cause it to go away temporarily. It is important not to set the hearing aid at excessively loud levels, as this can sometimes worsen the tinnitus. However, a thorough trial before purchase of a hearing aid is advisable if your primary purpose is the relief of tinnitus.

Tinnitus maskers can be combined within hearing aids. They emit a competitive but pleasant sound that can distract you from head noise. Some people find that a tinnitus masker may even suppress the head noise for several hours after it is used,

but this is not true for all users.

Prior to any treatment of tinnitus or head noise, Dr. Cote recommends that you have a thorough examination and evaluation by your otolaryngologist. An essential part of your treatment will be your understanding of tinnitus and its causes.

For more information on all your ear, nose and throat care needs, visit Dr. Cote and his partners at The Associates of Otolaryngology today - 850 E. Harvard Ave. Suite 505 • 303.744.1961.