

Be Ready With Recommendations for Swimmer's Ear

Top Takeaways

- Recommend a topical treatment based on eardrum status, cost, dosing frequency, and convenience.
- Avoid NONsterile or ototoxic ear drops in patients with a perforated eardrum or ear tubes.
- Suggest earplugs, ear protection headbands, or OTC isopropyl alcohol drops to prevent swimmer's ear.

Summer will bring questions about how to manage swimmer's ear, also known as acute otitis externa.

Continue to recommend a topical treatment based on eardrum status, cost, dosing frequency, and convenience...since one product has not been shown to be superior.

But keep certain caveats in mind.

For instance, steroid combos may only resolve pain a day sooner compared to treatment without a steroid. And avoid NONsterile or ototoxic ear drops in patients with a perforated eardrum or ear tubes.

Point out that most EYE drops can be used in the ear.

Use the chart below as a guide.

Examples of Otic Meds Used to Treat Swimmer's Ear*					
Drug name	Dose	Age	Ototoxic?	Can be used with a perforated eardrum or ear tubes?	Cost estimate per bottle
Antibiotic & Steroid Combination Drops					
Ciprofloxacin 0.3%, dexamethasone 0.1% (Ciprodex)	4 drops twice daily for 7 days	1 year	No	Yes	\$15 (generic)
Clioquinol 1%, flumethasone pivalate 0.02% (Locacorten Vioform)	2-3 drops twice daily for 7 days	2 years	Possibly	No	\$12
Gramicidin 0.05 mg, framycetin 5 mg, dexamethasone 0.5 mg per mL (Sofracort)	2-3 drops 3 to 4 times a day for 7 days	>18 years	Yes	No	\$19
Antibiotic Drops					
Gramicidin 0.025 mg and polymyxin B 10,000 IU per mL (Soothe)	1-2 drops 4 times a day for 5-7 days	6 years	Yes	No	\$12
Lidocaine 50 mg	3-4 drops 4 times a	6 years	Yes	No	\$15

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and polymyxin B day for 5-7 days
10,000 IU per mL
(Polysporin Plus
Pain Relief Ear
Drops)
**This list is not all-inclusive.*

Don't routinely recommend systemic antibiotics. Save these for if the infection spreads beyond the ear, ear drops can't be used, or there are necrotizing otitis risk factors (diabetes or immunocompromise).

For pain, suggest oral acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

Caution against home treatments withOUT evidence (isopropyl alcohol, white vinegar, etc). And tell patients ear candles have been shown to cause harm...such as hearing loss and tympanic membrane perforation.

Ensure patients know how to properly administer Rx ear drops.

Warm the bottle in the hands first. Lie down with the affected ear facing up, apply the correct number of drops to fill the ear canal, and massage the tragus area. After 5 min, the ear can drain and dry naturally.

To help PREVENT infection, suggest using earplugs or ear protection headbands (Ear Band-It, etc) while swimming. Or try OTC isopropyl alcohol drops (Auro-Dri, etc) after water exposure.

Additionally, patients can use a hair dryer on the lowest setting, several inches from the ear, to dry the ears after water exposure.

Tell patients swimming should be avoided during treatment (about a week). But competitive swimmers can sometimes return in 2-3 days after pain has resolved...AND if well-fitting earplugs are used.

Key References:

- Rosenfeld RM, Schwartz SR, Cannon CR, et al. Clinical practice guideline: acute otitis externa. Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg. 2014 Feb;150(1 Suppl):S1-S24.
 - Ellis J, De La Lis A, Rosen E, et al. Approach to otitis externa. Can Fam Physician. 2024 Oct;70(10):617-623. <https://canadianhealthcarenetwork.ca/minor-ailment-counselling-tool-otitis-externa> (Accessed May 15, 2026).
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