SWIMMER'S EAR INFO

"Swimmer's ear" (acute otitis externa)

Swimmer's Ear:
Common summer time illness
Responsible for 2.4 million doctor visits a year
8 medical visits are made per 1,000 population
Highest occurrence rates are in children between the ages of 5 and 9 years old
Direct health care cost of more than $489 million
Also, time away from camps, social activities, parents' work absences and child's discomfort

Symptoms:
Pain - especially when the ear is moved or pulled gently
Itchiness
Discharge from the ear may, at times, be noted

Causes:
Usually due to bacteria
Most common bacteria are:
*Pseudomonas aeruginosa - an organism found in moist areas (sneaker soles, recurrently moist inner ears)
*Staphylococcus (a frequent skin inhabitant)
*High temperature, high humidity (like the Southeast area of the United States) and prolonged exposure of the skin in the ear canal to water are risk factors
The increased water exposure:
1. Can cause the skin to become macerated with microscopic tears in the skin
- anything inserted into a macerated ear canal (cotton-tip swabs for cleaning, hearing aids, or a finger used to scratch the itchy ear) further increases the odds of getting swimmer's ear
2. Washes away ear wax
- ear wax is a water-repellent coating for the skin
- like car wax, it beads up water rather than let it penetrate beneath the surface
- it has antibacterial properties

Treatment:
Topical antibacterial drops are as effective as those that also contain a mild steroid
These medicated drops should be used for at least a week and continuing their use for a few days after symptoms have resolved
Most symptoms resolve by six days after starting treatment
If no improvement is noted within 48 to 72 hours consult your physician
Have the child avoid submerging his/her head in water for a few days (using water proof ear plugs is another option).

Prevention:
Keep ears as dry as possible
Dry them thoroughly after swimming or bathing
Use a towel to dry the ear and tilt the head to each side in turn to allow water to

drain
Consider using a blow dryer (lowest heat and fan speed and held several inches away from the ear)
Alcohol-based ear drops reduce moisture in the ear canal and reduce bacterial growth
- over the counter preparations
- home made versions (1:1 mixture of rubbing alcohol and white vinegar)
- do not use in the presence of ear tubes, perforated ear drums or significant outer ear infection
Instruct children not to put objects in their ears (even fingers or cotton-tip swabs)
Ear plugs may be useful

Resources:

http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/rwi/illnesses/swimmers-ear.html
http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/rwi/rwi-prevention-week/index.html

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