

Referral Support Service

ENT

ENT08

Otitis Externa

Definition

Inflammation of the ear canal with or without infection.

This can be split into infective (usually bacterial or fungal) or non-infective dermatitis (allergic, eczematous).

Exclude Red Flag Symptoms

- Severe unremitting pain, cranial nerve palsy, or fever may represent malignant otitis externa (osteomyelitis of the temporal bone caused by *Pseudomonas aerogenosa*). More common in diabetic or immunocompromised patients.
- Spreading infection could be mastoiditis, periaural cellulitis, or perichondritis.

Management

- Discuss avoidance of water in the ear and foreign bodies, ear plugs, or hearing aids whilst infected
- Recommend an analgesic for symptomatic relief e.g. **paracetamol** or **ibuprofen** are usually sufficient. Codeine can provide additional analgesia for severe pain.
- **First line: OTC Acetic acid 2% spray** (Ear-calm®)* 1 spray TDS for 7 days
- **Alternative: flumetasone 0.02% + clioquinol 1% ear drops (Locorten-Vioform®)** 2-3 drops into the affected ear(s) BD
- As per: [North Yorkshire Antibiotic Guidance](#)
- In the presence of tympanic membrane perforation topical aminoglycoside use should be limited to 7 days to avoid ototoxicity.
- **Oral antibiotics** are rarely indicated - consider seeking specialist advice if an oral antibiotic is thought to be required
- If swelling of the external auditory canal or severe blockage by debris limit topical treatment then refer for micro-suction and consideration of using a wick to apply medication.
- Review if symptoms have not settled in 7-10 days and consider referral to ENT.
- If treatment fails or otitis externa is recurrent consider taking an ear swab.
- Remember chronic use of ear drops can lead to allergy to topical treatment and/or fungal infection.

Referral Information

Information to include in referral letter

- Relevant past medical / surgical history
- Current regular medication
- Smoking status

Investigations prior to referral

Ear swab

Patient Information

- <http://patient.info/health/ear-infection-otitis-externa>
- <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/otitis-externa/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

References

- 10 minute consultation: Otitis Externa *BMJ* 2012;344:e3623
- http://www.cks.nhs.uk/otitis_externa
- <http://www.entuk.org/news/news/attachments/eardrops>