

Be Ready to Help Treat Swimmer's Ear

Top Takeaways

- Expect swimmer's ear treatment to usually include an antibiotic ear drop with or without a steroid.
- Keep in mind that most EYE drops can be used in the ear if needed, but not the other way around.
- Follow your pharmacy policies to calculate days' supply.

Summer will bring more Rx's for swimmer's ear.

This bacterial infection is often due to water trapped in the ear canal...and can lead to pain, swelling, itchiness, etc.

Expect that most patients with swimmer's ear will get a topical antibiotic ear drop (ciprofloxacin, etc)...with or without a steroid (hydrocortisone, dexamethasone, etc).

Don't be surprised if you see an EYE drop to be used in the ear but alert your pharmacist if you see it the other way around.

Ask patients if they have ear tubes or a ruptured eardrum. If they say yes, alert the pharmacist to clarify if the med is appropriate.

These patients need to avoid NONsterile or ototoxic ear drops (gramicidin/polymyxin B, etc)...they can cause ear damage, severe irritation, or other issues if they get into the inner part of the ear.

Use the chart below as a quick reference 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	2-3 drops 3 to 4 times a day for 7 days	18 years	Yes	No	\$19

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e 0.5 mg per mL (Sofracort)					
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 and polymyxin B 10,000 IU per mL (Polysporin Plus Pain Relief Ear Drops)	3-4 drops 4 times a day for 5-7 days	6 years	Yes	No	\$15

**This list is not all-inclusive.*

Follow your pharmacy policies to calculate days' supply. Many use 20 drops/mL...but some use 15 or 16 drops/mL.

Include a "For the ear" auxiliary label on these Rx's...and send patients to the pharmacist for counselling on proper administration.

For pain, expect the pharmacist to recommend oral acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Help patients find these products on OTC shelves if needed.

Note that home treatments withOUT evidence (isopropyl alcohol, white vinegar, etc) aren't likely to help. And ear candles have been shown to cause harm (hearing loss, ruptured eardrum, etc).

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

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.
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- Pharmacy Technician's Letter Canada. June 2026, No. 420649

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