

Itchy ears

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ENT North

One of the most common causes of itchy ears is the use of cotton buds – often, ironically, used to scratch the itch. The microscopic scratches caused by the cotton bud cause itchiness as they heal and can also promote infection. The infection itself often causes itchiness as well.

Another cause can be inflammation of the skin of the ear canal (from chronic dermatitis, eczema or psoriasis). Interestingly some foods (e.g. greasy foods, sugar and starches) may aggravate the condition, thus you might want to try to avoid these.

Treating itchy ears

- Stop using cotton buds (or bobby pins, or pen lids, or your fingernail...) to clean your ears. They clean themselves.
- If you need to scratch your ears, feel free to use the tip of your finger either in the opening of the ear canal, or by pressing down just in front of the triangle of cartilage in front of the ear canal and rubbing vigorously. No fingernails into the ear canal, though!
- Try putting a few drops of olive, walnut or almond oil into the canal every few days. Sometimes it is more comfortable to use if it has been warmed slightly first.
- A steroid ear drop (such as mometasone 1% lotion) may be prescribed to reduce the itch and treat any underlying skin irritation. The lotion has the advantage of not 'clogging up' the canal like ointment does. It is common and expected that these will sting a little for a few days. If this is too stingy, swap to using olive oil for a few days then try again with the steroid lotion.

For a 'one-off' itch, use 2 drops twice a day for two weeks, and then leave the ear alone.

Some people need ongoing drops to keep their ears 'itch-free'. If you find the itch returns quickly after you stop the drops (and you are following the advice above), then try the following regimen:

- Initial 2 drops, twice daily, for two weeks.
- Then, 2 drops each side, three times a week (e.g. Mon/Wed/Fri) for two months.
- Then, 2 drops each side, twice weekly for two months.
- Then, 2 drops each side, weekly thereafter.

At a certain point, your ears may start to itch again – this is your body telling you to use the drops just a little more often (e.g. if your ear itches when you drop down to weekly, you need to use them twice weekly).

If your ear becomes blocked, swollen, or begins to discharge, this is usually a sign of infection, and you need to stop these drops and see your doctor