

## Take precautions to avoid 'surfer's ear'



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SURF'S UP!  
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

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It's that time of year again when the water and air start getting colder and surfers need to pay special attention to protecting their ears from the elements.

Cold wind and water promote the dreaded "surfer's ear" condition, which is basically an abnormal bone growth known as an exostosis within the ear canal. More times than not it leads to surgery and time out of the water. I have had both my ears operated on and can tell ya that it's better to take some precautions.

One of the leading ear doctors on the planet in this field is right here in Orange County, Dr. Carol Jackson. I recently was having her check ears and asked her if there were any new developments on treatments for surfer's ear. She said yes, so I asked her to write me up some info to share with you. Here is what she wrote:

"What are symptoms of surfer's ear that surfers can watch for?"

One is difficulty clearing the ear after surfing despite jumping up and down and other maneuvers. As exostoses enlarge, plugging occurs every time during surfing and eventually persists.

Another is discomfort to awake-at-night pain and drainage develops when the ear canal is narrowed by 80 percent or more.

With 90 percent or more narrowing, even a visit to an urgent care center and antibiotic ear drops might not clear the blockage of "debris" and swelling of infection.

How would one prevent surfer's ear and swimmer's ear?

Use ear plugs in the water, but most surfers don't use them until exostosis is causing symptoms. Mainly, ear plugs need to fit well.

Air drying with a warm blow dryer for a few minutes over the ears after surfing reduces plugging and infections, which can be stubborn, like "athlete's foot".

Avoid using isopropyl or rubbing alcohol to dry the ear or to reduce bacteria. It removes the protective water-repellant skin oils and can promote infection.

A word about ear wax: Ear wax is our friend – not dirt! It's a water-repellent moisturizer that traps foreign particles and carries them to the ear opening as skin cells shed like skin does everywhere.

You wouldn't strip the wax off your surfboard then take it to the beach, would you? Likewise we don't want the delicate ear canal skin to be exposed to the ocean elements.

The ear is generally self-cleaning – no Q-tips are needed! Using them can push wax deeper where the ear cannot clear it. They can cause dryness, itching and infection.

What are other interesting facts or misconceptions?

The prevalence and severity increases in proportion to cumulative time surfing and how cold the water is.

Surgical removal is surprisingly not painful.

Exostoses don't re-grow to need repeat removal if they are completely removed.

Exostoses don't shrink with using ear plugs or discontinuing water exposure.

With 90 percent or more blockage, trapped skin behind exostoses can cause plugging and infection even when the patient stays out of water."