

Water precautions for ears

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You need to take water precautions with your ears if you have any of the following:

- Grommets
- Perforation
- Recurring ear infections
- Mastoid ear surgery
- Exostoses – “Surfers Ear”

Taking water precautions with your ears is one of the main ways to prevent ear infections.

We recommend the following:

Take a small piece of cotton wool (out of an ordinary cotton wool ball you will get approx. 10 ear plugs), dip it in a pot of Vaseline then place the cotton wool in the bowl of your ear covering the opening of your ear canal. Then put some more Vaseline on top of the cotton wool liberally with your finger. You need to do this before showering and washing your hair.

It is the Vaseline that makes your ear waterproof; don't just put cotton wool in on its own because it will soak up the water. When you have finished the water activity, remove the cotton wool and throw it away. Leave any excess Vaseline in place because it's a good lubricator for your ears. DO NOT try to remove it with a cotton bud.

Cotton wool and Vaseline ear precautions are safe, most reliable, easily accessible and affordable.

DO NOT submerge your head under the water in the bath.

If swimming, no diving, jumping in or swimming underwater whether or not you are wearing ear protection/ear plugs. When swimming, we recommend the cotton wool and Vaseline precautions and wearing a swimming cap or protective ear bands.

Swim plugs are not funded by the NHS unless there is a medical reason for not being able to use the cotton wool and Vaseline or off the shelf plugs, e.g. if a person had a mastoid cavity.

When surfing we also recommend the cotton wool and Vaseline precautions and wearing a swimming cap. Another possibility to protect the ear is a soft prefabricated ear plug which may cause less hearing impairment than an earplug made of hard material. Some surfers say they find it difficult to hear when in the water. The cotton wool and Vaseline may cause the least hearing impairment and when properly used as a new plug each time will be the least likely to cause irritation and ear infections.

Ear plugs have some problems, in that if you move your jaw the shape of the inside of your ear changes and you may get leakage. Also if you aren't meticulous about cleaning your ear plugs every time you use them, they may become a vehicle for infection themselves. The best way of cleaning a reusable ear plug is to soak it overnight in a safe disinfectant solution such as Milton's.

NEVER use cotton buds – you can push the wax further down your ear canal and impact it against your ear drum, which can result in temporary or, on rare occasions, permanent hearing loss or tinnitus. There is also the possibility of causing trauma to the ear canal and the ear drum.

For people with grommets

From the time of an operation to insert or remove a grommet(s) until a successful 6 week check, you must not swim and when showering, bathing and washing your hair you must use cotton wool and Vaseline plugs.

Following a successful 6 week check in ENT, people with grommets may swim without ear protection but must continue to protect ears in the bath/shower where soap and shampoo in the water lower its surface tension, allowing water to penetrate the grommet and cause difficulties including discharge and infection.

Some grommet patients will not like the sensation of swimming pool water in their ears; they therefore may choose to wear ear protection when swimming for this reason.

WHETHER wearing ear protection/plugs or not, there must be NO diving, jumping in or swimming below the surface of the water as long as grommets remain in place in the eardrum.

The increased pressure may force water through the grommet; although rare, the sudden pressure particularly associated with diving can dislodge the grommet, tearing the eardrum or even forcing a grommet into the middle ear.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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