

House Calls

Tips for a Healthy Vacation

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

With the significant amount of hours each resident and visitor to the Outer Banks spends enjoying the water during the summer; it's no wonder that the vast majority of the patients I treat each summer season have an ailment that is somehow related to the water. By far, the number one chief complaint I get calls for is ear pain. The most common cause of this usually excruciating ear discomfort is due to the small amount of water remaining in the ear canal over an extended period of time, which ultimately turns into an external ear infection, otherwise known as swimmer's ear. Swimmer's ear is not only quite painful, if left untreated, it may turn into an even more serious infection to the outer ear structures, and the surrounding skin. There's nothing like a child (or adult for that matter) with serious ear pain to put a damper on a family vacation. Allow me to pass on a few hints on how to handle the dreaded earache.

First of all, let me clear up one of the most common misconceptions that people have regarding swimmer's ear. It is an infection. It really should be treated with antibiotic drops. Sometimes, it even needs to be treated with both drops and antibiotics by mouth, depending on the severity of the infection, and if it has spread. Many people tell me they didn't think that swimmer's ear is an infection, and they try to self treat their ear pain with over the counter ear drops marketed for swimmer's ear. The key is if there is pain, it is usually too late to use those drops. The drops you can buy over the counter are to help prevent swimmers ear, by drying up the small amount of water left in the ear canal after swimming. If you use these drops once you already have pain, and therefore probably already have an infection, they will usually cause some increased burning discomfort. If you are prone to getting swimmer's ear, you may want to talk to your medical provider about the use of preventative ear drops. Just remember, if you have ear pain, it's a good idea not to let it go too long, and to get it evaluated by a medical provider.

Two other water related ailments people often wonder what to do about are jelly fish stings and stingray injuries. The jelly fish that we sometimes have in our area can cause a sting to the skin that is uncomfortable and many compare the pain to that of a bee sting. There is generally a small amount of swelling and redness near the area of the sting, which may burn and itch. If you have a large amount of swelling, you may be allergic, and should seek medical attention immediately. However, if it is a small area, you can actually make a paste out of vinegar and meat tenderizer and apply it to help alleviate the discomfort. Using an over the counter antihistamine gives some people relief from the itching. You may want to contact your medical provider for further information. As far as the stingray injuries, they are typically on the feet (while walking in the Sound) or the hands (after you've caught one while fishing, and are attempting to get them off your line). The first thing that people do when they get these injuries is usually the wrong thing to do. Do not put ice on the stingray injury. It usually makes the pain so much worse. The first thing you should do is immerse the injured area in a bucket of hot water, and you will be shocked how fast the pain is relieved! It is recommended that once you have obtained a stingray injury, you should be evaluated to be sure the small barb that is on the end of the stingray's tail has not broken off under your skin. If your injury is deep, this may even include an x-ray.

Another common call I get is from the frantic parent who has a toddler (or younger) with a sunburn. Please remember, that even if your young child is under an umbrella, and wearing a hat, the sun is still reflecting off of the sand, and off of the water, and your child can still get sunburned. Try to keep the little ones out of the sun during peak sun hours (noon-3pm) and reapply a waterproof sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher at least once an hour. Here's wishing you a safe and healthy summer in the Outer Banks.

Rikki Schuster, PA-C, is a certified Physician Assistant with 12 years of emergency medicine and urgent care experience. She sees and treats vacationers and locals for non-emergent medical ailments in the comfort of your home or vacation cottage. Please call Medical House Calls at 252-475-2007 for appointment information. www.obxmedicalhousecalls.com