

An After-Dip Earplug

By LAURA JOHANNES

Most swimmers' earplugs are meant to be worn in the water. A new type is worn after your swim so it can suck out the water, according to the company that sells it. So far there are no clinical trials on the product, and physicians' opinions are mixed on its utility.

For many, summer is the season of swimmer's ear, also called acute otitis externa, a painful infection of the outer ear canal. It's caused by a combination of moisture in the ear and slight injuries to the skin in the ear canal, providing an opening for bacteria or moisture. For people prone to it, doctors often recommend using alcohol-based ear drops after swimming to dry trapped water.



The new plugs, called ClearEars, are made of a soft foam that soaks up water. "Water trapped in the ears after swimming or bathing can be very uncomfortable and may lead to ear problems such as swimmer's ears," says maker Cirrus Healthcare Products LLC, Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., on its

Web site. The product "dries and relieves" and "helps prevent ear discomfort," the package says.

The plugs, which aren't reusable, cost \$6 to \$7 for a packet of five pairs. To use them, you roll the plugs between your fingers to compress the foam and then insert them into the ear canal. The plugs can be used in children 3 and up, the company says, but adult supervision is suggested for anyone under 15. In an unscientific test by The Wall Street Journal, the plugs did absorb water from the ear canal.

So far the product is too new for doctors to have experience with it, but some doctors say they like the idea.

Marcella Bothwell, a pediatrician at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego, says the product provides a useful alternative to ear drops. "Kids do hate putting drops in their ears," says Dr. Bothwell, a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Otolaryngology. Ear drops are expensive and can be uncomfortable because they must be applied with the head tilted, doctors say.

But Richard M. Rosenfeld, a Long Island ear specialist who is the primary author of the AAO'S guidelines for treating swimmer's ear, warns that inserting plugs in the ear could actually be harmful, as it could result in small scratches. "The whole principle of avoiding swimmer's ear is to avoid any trauma to the delicate skin in the ear canal," Dr. Rosenfeld says.

He doesn't recommend ear plugs during swimming, for the same reason. To save money on ear drops, he says, rubbing alcohol can be transferred to a small bottle with a dropper, such as those sold with ear drops.

The company says that the plug is extremely soft and doesn't damage skin when inserted or removed.

