

The ears have it: exostoses, otitis and stenosis



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Some rather annoying health issues arise with constant surfing. For some reason, I am susceptible to all of them.

Ear, eye, back, skin and all sorts of other little health complications come with continual exposure to sun, wind, water, and the pounding of day-to-day surfing and paddling.

One of the most common problems is "surfer's ear." The correct name is exostoses of the external auditory canal (the bony growths) with external otitis (inflamed or infected skin) and acquired external canal stenosis (narrowing). If this gets bad, it requires surgery.

I have had my ears drilled out five times.

I get asked about it all the time. So I contacted who I consider the leading expert in this area, Dr. Carol Jackson of Newport Beach. I asked her to write on this and related ear problems for surfers.

Here's her take on the problems:

"I'm doing the exostoses removal and canal reconstructions through the ear canal without needing to make the post-auricular incision behind the ear in cases where the exostoses obstruct less than 95 percent of the canal.

"Through the use of local ear canal skin and rotation grafts, the time out of the water is usually a little less, at three to four weeks.

"It's best to have them removed when they are 70 percent to 90 percent occlusive of the ear canal. That's usually when they cause water to be trapped and dead skin debris causes pain and plugging sensations.

"It's best to have them removed when they are in the 70 percent to 80 percent range, since they are less likely to be pressing on the eardrum and fusing with the top layer of the eardrum, which may require grafting in surgery.

"It makes for a little bigger procedure and longer wound healing (six weeks) and staying out of the water.

"Swim plugs do prevent recurrence, if they are used in the ears. Not much good in a pocket!

"(Although I've not had any of my own patients have significant regrowth – that is for 15 years. But there is a risk with 20-plus years' exposure.)

"The plugs come in colors and float. While not always watertight, they prevent the sudden rush of water against the eardrum.

"The colder the water, the more frequent and severe exostoses formations are, although they occur in the tropics, too.

"There are some new ear drops, Derm Otic Oily Solution, that are great after getting out of the water and for bedtime use.

"It is a water-repelling coating agent, with a topical steroid to reduce inflammation.

"It's a prescription drug, also great for hearing-aid wearers, for mild external otitis (outer ear canal inflammation) but not for treating a rip-roaring painful infection.

"Frequent use of alcohol or hydrogen peroxide is drying to the ear canal skin, which causes cracking and opens the skin to infections."