

A Paddler's Guide to Surfer's Ear

Overview

Surfer's ear, or External Auditory Exostosis, is a condition that's becoming increasingly common in paddlesports. While the name suggests it's for surfers, it's a significant issue for anyone who spends regular time in, on or around cold, open water.

What is Surfer's Ear?

Surfer's ear is a condition where your ear canal develops bony growths as a natural defence mechanism against prolonged exposure to cold water and wind. This growth causes the canal to narrow, which can lead to a number of problems. The exact reason why this happens isn't fully understood, but it's clearly your body's attempt to protect your inner ear from the elements.

The Paddler's Risk

The risk is not limited to those in the surf. If you're in a kayak, on a stand-up paddleboard, or in a canoe, you are at risk. In the UK, any open water below 19°C is cold enough to promote these growths. The colder the water, and the more often you're out, the greater your risk. The wind chill is also thought to contribute to bone formation when water is warmer than 19° C. Most studies suggest that significant Surfer's Ear can develop after 50 or more sessions a year over a period of five years or more.

Do I Have It?

Many people with mild to moderate Surfer's Ear don't know it, as symptoms can take a while to appear. However, once they start, they are permanent.

Symptoms include:

- A feeling of a blocked or full ear.
- Tinnitus.
- Frequent ear infections.
- Water getting trapped in your ear after a session.
- Deafness caused by a blockage of wax, debris, or water.
- Pain or discomfort, especially when exposed to cold wind or water.

The best way to know for sure is to get your ears checked by a medical professional.

Prevention is Key

Once Surfer's Ear has been developed, the only treatment involves surgically removing the bony growths (exostoses) that narrows the ear canal. This surgery is typically performed under general anaesthesia and involves a medical professional using either a small chisel or drill to shave or drill away the excess bone through an incision behind the ear or within the ear canal.

Prevention is the best approach. The most effective way to prevent Surfer's ear is to keep cold water and wind out of your ear canals. While a hood or hat offers some protection, it's not a complete answer, as water and wind can still penetrate through.

We recommend prioritising a well-fitted earplug. Whilst there are many brands to choose from, some companies specialise in custom-fitted options to provide optimum comfort and protection.

Advice for Coaches and Leaders

Proactive guidance and prevention are the best defence against cold water injuries. Coaches and instructors should emphasise this by teaching paddlers efficient techniques to avoid unnecessary dunkings, encouraging protective habits like wearing earplugs and using headwear before and after paddling, and consistently modelling this good practice themselves. By raising awareness and fostering these habits, coaches and leaders can help paddlers stay safer on the water.

A Note on Children

With paddlesports growing in popularity among young people, experts are seeing a rise in Surfer's ear cases in teenagers. For young paddlers, ear protection should be seen as a standard part of their kit, just like appropriate clothing and PPE.

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