Ears problems and diving

I’ve occasionally had problems clearing my ears, particularly my right ear, and I take medication for allergies and nasal congestion. A couple of months ago I got a sinus infection, and in the weeks that followed I saw my regular doctor once and an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist twice for congestion and muffled hearing. The doctors noted fluid behind both eardrums at each visit and prescribed three separate courses of oral steroids and antibiotics. I’m going back to the ENT in a few days, and I think I may still have fluid in my right ear (I can feel air moving when I yawn). He said he would want to insert tubes if the condition hadn’t resolved. I am concerned about the amount of time this procedure would keep me out of the water and about the potential for scarring of my eardrums. Do you know of any other options besides ear tubes for draining the fluid?

Answer from DAN experts:

Unfortunately it sounds as though your doctors have exhausted all options for resolving the congestion in your ear. The purpose of steroids is to reduce inflammation and allow the fluid to drain via the Eustachian tubes. Fluid that stays in the ear for extended periods can promote bacterial growth, leading to a risk of middle-ear infection. Antibiotics serve as a means to fight or prevent such an infection. If oral steroids, decongestants and antibiotics have not solved the problem, then ear grommets are the next logical step. You are correct that grommets pose a risk of scarring on the tympanic membrane (eardrum), but they are unlikely to affect your ability to dive in the future. Grommet insertion is a fairly benign procedure. Following your doctor’s advice is prudent: If he believes grommets are the best way to resolve this problem, then it makes sense to proceed. Although diving with the grommets in place is strongly discouraged (because of the high risk of middle-ear infection and vertigo from incursion of water), after they’re removed or fall out on their own, diving is generally possible after a healing period of at least six weeks. Before you dive again, go back to your doctor to ensure your eardrums have healed fully and function properly. Should your doctor have any dive-related questions, please encourage him to contact us.