Summer swim? Watch out for 'swimmer's ear'

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When weather gets hot and people start jumping into a pool, lake or

ocean, cases of swimmer's ear are likely to climb, but one expert says there are steps you can take to avoid the painful condition.

The best prevention is a simple one: avoid getting water in your ears, said Dr. Hongzhao Ji, an assistant professor of otolaryngology–head and neck surgery at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, in Dallas.

If water is already in your ear, getting it out can help, but Ji advises against using a cotton swab, which can push earwax deeper and may scratch the ear canal skin.

One option is to use ear drops after swimming. Drops are usually a combination of alcohol and vinegar meant to sterilize the ear canal and restore its desired pH. Some drops/irrigation-based products can be purchased over the counter, Ji said in a university news release.

Anyone who gets water into their external ear canal is at risk of swimmer's ear, but the risks are higher when the water isn't chlorinated because river or lake water can contain more bacteria.

Swimmers also risk contracting other potentially more dangerous infectious diseases in lake water, including meningitis, hepatitis and a rare infection known as brain-eating amoeba.

An ear can be damaged by swimmer's ear, though it is usually mild and temporary. There can be long-term effects that lead to hearing loss or chronic infections, but most people with swimmer's ear recover completely with adequate treatment, Ji said.

Typical treatment for swimmer's ear is an antimicrobial applied directly to the ear canal, plus cleaning the canal of any pus, earwax, oils or dead skin cells.

If you have worsening ear pain, it's time to see a doctor, Ji said, especially if you are not hearing well, have a clogged sensation in your ear or see any foul-smelling fluid or debris coming out of your ear.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on ear infections and swimming.

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