

Patient Information Leaflet

What is ear wax?

Wax is an important and natural secretion found in the ear. It protects the ear against dust, dirt and bacteria, so it helps to prevent infection. Wax, or cerumen as it is also known, is composed of epithelium (skin cells), dust and oily secretions from the sebaceous and ceruminous glands in the ear canal. These secretions lubricate the ear canal and prevent it becoming too dry. The composition of wax varies from individual to individual depending on diet, age and environment.

Some of the common problems are: -

- Narrow ear canals. Dusty or dirty environment, people who work in areas where there is a lot of dust or dirt in the air sometimes finds that this combines with the cerumen in the ear to form a plug.
- Cleaning attempts. Using cotton buds, matchsticks and hair clips to try to clean out the ear canals is one of the most common causes of impacted wax. It causes the wax to be forced down the canal and form a hard dry plug against the eardrum. Matchsticks and hair clips can inflict considerable damage to the skin lining of the canal.
- Earplugs. The use of earplugs, often mandatory in some occupations, can have a similar effect to cotton buds.
- Hearing Aid moulds. They can interfere with the natural ability to shed dead skin and wax, and cause debris to build up in the canal.
- Habit. Some people become accustomed to attending regularly for ear irrigation, believing it is necessary to prevent them experiencing hearing loss.
- Age. Older people may have drier wax, and older men often develop more hairy ears.

What should you do about ear wax build up?

If wax is not causing any problems, it is best left alone. The ear is self-cleaning and the wax should clear naturally, so it is unnecessary to try to remove the wax yourself. If wax is noticed on the outer ear, a wipe with a clean flannel may be all that is needed. Sometimes, however, wax may build up, particularly if it is very dry or if the person has a narrow or hairy ear canal. Wax may also build up if it has been pushed down the canal by cotton buds, hearing aids, hair clips or other implements. Cotton buds can also irritate the ear canal, stripping it of its natural oils and causing it to feel itchy. When water gets into the ear during swimming or showering this may cause the wax to expand, giving a sensation of 'blockage' in the ear and increasing the perception of tinnitus.

How can you treat ear wax at home?

If you have any pain in your ears, or any discharge from them, do not attempt any treatment at home, but see your GP. Most people tend to use ear wax softening drops as the first option for wax removal. These may soften the wax enough to aid the natural expulsion from the ear. There are many ear drops on the market. Some proprietary drops may be harsh to use, particularly if the person has a sensitive skin or any skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis. Sodium bicarbonate ear drops can also be effective but again some people find them very drying.

Rather than use such ear drops, many people find that olive oil is easily available, comfortable to use and does not need to be warmed before use. Three or four drops, two or three times a day for one to two weeks is usually sufficient, and the wax will often then come out by itself. When introducing drops into the ear, it is best to use a dropper and lay with your head on one side for a couple of minutes to allow the drops to move along the ear canal. After this period, cotton wool may be used to soak up any excess from the outside of the ear.

If you often get a build-up of ear wax, using a couple of drops of olive oil once a week may help prevent the build-up.

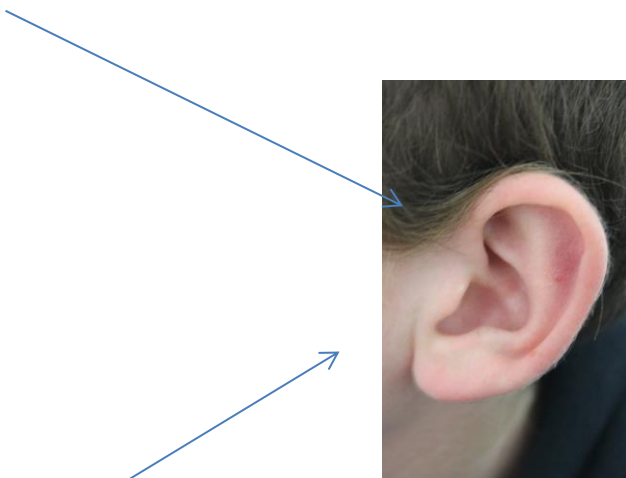
INSTALLATION OF EAR DROPS

In preparation for ear irrigation and to encourage normal wax expulsion from the outer ear

When using olive oil drops

1. Lie down on your side with the affected ear uppermost
2. Drop 2 or 3 drops of oil (at room temperature) into the ear canal and massage the tragus, just in front of the ear and pull the pinna backwards and upwards. This enables the oil to run down the ear canal.

Pinna



Tragus

3. Stay lying down for 5 minutes and then wipe away any excess oil.
4. Do not leave cotton wool at the entrance to the ear
5. Repeat the procedure with the opposite ear if necessary.

Hopi ear candling

Practitioners of Hopi ear candling often claim that it is effective for removing ear wax but we remain concerned about this form of therapy. There is no good evidence that it helps with wax removal. There is, however, good evidence that the use of ear candles has damaged some people's ears.

What clinical methods are used to remove ear wax?

One of the most frequent ways to remove wax in general practice is by ear irrigation, or syringing as it is commonly known. This procedure cannot be carried out if the person has had any ear surgery, recent infections or a perforation of the ear drum. It is also not advisable to carry out the procedure if the patient has any dizziness problems or very troublesome tinnitus.

Complications of ear irrigation

The following have been reported:

- Failure of wax removal
- Otitis externa
- Perforation of the tympanic membrane
- Damage to the external auditory meatus
- Necrotizing (malignant) external otitis is a rare infection, occurring primarily in immunocompromised people, especially older people with diabetes mellitus, and is often initiated by iatrogenic trauma to the external auditory canal.
- Pain
- Vertigo
- Otitis media due to water entering the middle ear when there is a previous perforation.
- Exacerbation of pre-existing tinnitus.
- Serious injury to the middle and inner ear (rare).
- Bleeding (usually self limiting).
- Nausea, vomiting, and vertigo may result from temperature variations of the irrigating fluid.

Wax can also be removed by micro-suction. This procedure is most commonly carried out in hospitals although some primary care clinics can also now offer this. During this procedure the clinician looks through a microscope and suctions the ear with a small instrument. It is a noisy procedure and although some patients may find the procedure slightly uncomfortable it should not be painful.

To summarise:

- Wax is a natural secretion and if it is not a problem it is best left alone
- Do not use cotton buds, hair grips, a pencil or other items to try to remove the wax
- Consider ear wax softening drops or olive oil as the first option unless you are experiencing pain or discharge
- Visit a clinician who will advise whether wax removal is necessary and what type of procedure is most appropriate for you depending on your medical history

REFERENCES

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Primary care ear centre The Rotherham NHS Foundation Trust March 2011

NMC Code of conduct April 2008

NMC guidance on record keeping July 2007

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