

Ear Wax

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from Ear wax. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

- **What is Ear wax?** Ear wax is a normal build up of dead cells, hair and foreign materials such as dust and natural wax (cerumen) which forms a protective coating on the skin in the ear canal. This protective coating is antimicrobial and helps to keep ears clean and free of germs.
- **How common is Ear wax?** Everyone has ear wax, the amount produced varies from person to person
- **What's causes a build up of ear wax?** The body tends to produce more ear wax in response to colds, dusty environments or too fervent ear cleaning/wax removal. Some people are genetically prone to produce more ear wax. Still, excess wax doesn't automatically lead to blockage. In fact, the most common cause of earwax blockage is at-home removal. Using cotton swabs, bobby pins, or other objects (including hearing aids) in your ear canal can push wax deeper, creating a blockage. In older people the wax tends to be drier and so not move out of the ear so freely. Narrow or hairy ear canals are also prone to blocking.

What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Need for treatment** If the ear wax is not causing any problems, leave it alone.
- ✓ **Symptoms** In some people a build up of ear wax can cause hearing loss, earaches, itchiness, tinnitus (hearing sounds from inside your body) and vertigo (a spinning sensation).

What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Ear drops** In most cases, this will clear a plug of ear wax. Ear drops are inexpensive and can be bought from pharmacies and supermarkets. Using ear drops may cause a temporary hearing loss, discomfort, dizziness and irritation as the wax is softening.
 - 1 - Warm the drops to room temperature before using them
 - 2 - Lie with the affected ear facing up when putting in drops
 - 3 - Pour a few drops into the affected ear
 - 4 - Stay like this for a few minutes to allow the drops to soak into the earwax
 - 5 - Gentle manipulation of the ear by pulling the outside of the ear downwards and backwards can help penetration of the drops into the wax

✓ **Olive Oil** Ordinary olive oil can be used instead of ear drops. For those prone to wax blockages, using drops or olive oil once or twice weekly can prevent build up.

There are other types of ear wax removal equipment available online and in pharmacies, including bulbar ear syringing home kits and ear wax removal candles, but they are not recommended for use as they can cause injury to the ears if used inappropriately.

When should I seek medical help?

Seek advice from your pharmacist or GP if ear drops/oil have not worked in 4-6 weeks or if you are in doubt the symptoms you have are caused by wax. Severe persistent pain is unlikely to be caused by wax.

➤ **Ear syringing** The wax must be soft in order for it to be washed out of the ear canal. Luke warm water is squirted into the ear canal using a machine which jets water at the right pressure. Irrigation is usually painless but can occasionally cause damage to the eardrum. Ear irrigation is not suitable for people who have had previous complications with this procedure, those with grommets in place, previous ear surgery (apart from grommets that came out at least 18 months ago), patients who have ever had cleft palate or perforated ear drum, anyone with a current recent (previous 6 weeks) ear infection or those who get recurring ear infections.

➤ **Microsuction** In exceptional circumstances if ear syringing does not work or is not advised, your GP can refer you to the community ear, nose and throat service for wax removal by microsuction.

Where can I find out more?

Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms and advise on suitable treatments.



111 is the NHS non-emergency number. It's fast, easy and free. Call 111 and speak to a highly trained adviser, supported by healthcare professionals. They will ask you a series of questions to assess your symptoms and immediately direct you to the best medical care for you.

NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.