

Earwax

Good intentions to keep ears clean may be risking the ability to hear. The ear is a delicate and intricate area, including the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum. Therefore, special care should be given to this part of the body. Start by discontinuing the use of ear buds and the habit of probing the ears.

Why does the body produce earwax?

Cerumen or earwax is healthy in normal amounts and serves to coat the skin of the ear canal where it acts as a temporary water repellent. The absence of earwax may result in dry, itchy ears. Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning; that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of ear canal skin from the eardrum to the ear opening. Old earwax is constantly being transported from the ear canal to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

Earwax is not formed in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum, but in the outer part of the canal. So when a patient has wax blockage against the eardrum, it is often because he has been probing the ear with such things as ear buds, keys, pins, or twisted napkin corners. These objects only push the wax in deeper.

What is the recommended method of ear cleaning?

Under ideal circumstances, the ear canals should never have to be cleaned. However, that isn't always the case. To clean the ears, wash the external ear with a cloth, but do not insert anything into the ear canal.

Most cases of ear wax blockage respond to home treatments used to soften wax. Patients can try placing a few drops of coconut/sesame oil, olive oil, or commercial drops, such as Soliwax® Ear Drops in the ear. Rarely, people have allergic reactions to commercial preparations.

Detergent drops such as hydrogen peroxide may also aid in the removal of wax. Rinsing the ear canal with hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) results in oxygen bubbling off and water being left behind—wet, warm ear canals make good incubators for growth of bacteria. Flushing the ear canal with rubbing alcohol displaces the water and dries the canal skin. If alcohol causes severe pain, it suggests the presence of an eardrum perforation.

What are the symptoms of wax buildup?

- Partial hearing loss, may be progressive
- Tinnitus, noises in the ear
- Earache
- Fullness in the ear or a sensation the ear is plugged

When should a doctor be consulted?

If the home treatments discussed in this page are not satisfactory, or if wax has accumulated so much that it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), an ENT surgeon may prescribe eardrops designed to soften wax, or he may wash or vacuum it out. Occasionally, there may be a need to remove the wax using microscopic visualization.

If there is a possibility of a perforation or puncture in the eardrum, consult an ENT surgeon prior to trying any over-the-counter remedies. Putting eardrops or other products in the ear with the presence of an eardrum perforation may cause an infection. Certainly, washing water through such a hole could start an infection.

What can I do to prevent excessive earwax?

There are no proven ways to prevent cerumen impaction, but not inserting cotton-tipped swabs or other objects in the ear canal is strongly advised. If you are prone to repeated wax impaction or use hearing aids, consider seeing your doctor every 6 to 12 months for a checkup and routine preventive cleaning.