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Ear Wax

a self- help guide

What is ear wax?

Ear wax is a build- up of dead cells, hair, foreign material such as dust and cerumen. Cerumen is the natural wax produced by glands in the ear. It forms a protective coating of the skin in the ear canal. Small amounts are made all the time. Flakes or crusts of earwax breakoff and fall out of the ear from time to time.

If you feel there is a build up of wax in your ear(s) please read the following self-help guide as you may not require an appointment.

Points to remember

- Ear wax is normal and it provides protection for your ears.
- Your ears are self- cleaning.
- The movement of your jaw whilst eating and talking helps to move the wax along the canal.
- Ear wax only becomes a problem if it causes deafness, pain or if a health professional needs a clear view of the ear drum.

What makes ear wax worse?

- The amount of wax produced varies from person to person.
- Some people produce excessive amounts of wax and this can block the ear canal.
- Wearing a hearing aid, ear plugs or head phones can interfere with wax expulsion.
- Narrow and/ or hairy ear canals.
- If you are elderly - the wax produced may be harder and drier.
- Dry skin in people who suffer with eczema or psoriasis.

What you should not do

- Use cotton buds to clean the ear. This forces the wax deeper into the canal and can cause damage, trauma and possible infection.
- Do not use objects such as matches, hair grips, crochet hooks, knitting needles, keys etc. this can cause trauma and possible infection.
- If your ears are itchy do not scratch or rub them with your finger nails or any other objects.
- Do not use anything smaller than your elbow in your ear!

What helps?

- Try and keep your ears dry. When washing your hair, showering or swimming putting some Vaseline around the inner part of your ear can help.
- Don't put your head under the water when bathing.
- Some people are troubled by repeated build- up of earwax and may benefit from regular use of ear drops.

What you can do to manage the problem?

Using ear drops- these may be almond or olive oil and should be used **2- 3 times daily for 14 days.**

1. Lie on your side with the affected ear uppermost.
2. Pull the outer ear gently backwards and upwards to straighten the ear canal.
3. Put 2-3 drops of almond or olive oil into the affected ear(s) and gently massage just in front of the ear.
4. Stay lying on your side for 10 minutes to allow the wax to soak up the oil.
5. Afterwards, wipe away any excess oil but do not plug your ear with cotton wool as this simply absorbs the oil.
6. Your hearing problem may initially worsen after first starting to use ear drops; this is why you are advised to concentrate on treating one ear at a time if both ears are blocked with wax.
7. In most cases, after 14 days. The wax will have softened sufficiently to encourage the wax to come out.

Alternatively

There are now a number of over- the- counter kits available from pharmacies. These contain a wax softener as drops which you use for 3-4 days and a small bulb syringe to enable you to remove the wax from your ear canals yourself. These kits can be easily purchased from your local pharmacy or online by searching 'ear wax bulb syringe'

The specially designed ear syringes are designed to create enough pressure to clear wax out of the ear without causing damage to the ear drum. It is very important to use hand- temperature, tepid body temperature water for this process having used olive oil or the drops in the previous days.

Always follow the instructions provided with the kit.

Research shows that bulb syringing is effective and acceptable to patients and could significantly reduce the use of NHS resources.



Ongoing self- care

Some people are naturally prone to ear wax building up in their ears and may need frequent treatment to remove it when it becomes a problem. It's not clear if there's anything you can do to stop earwax blocking your ears, although some doctors recommend using eardrops regularly to keep your earwax soft.

When to seek help from a health professional?

If you are experiencing the following symptoms:

- Pain
- Discharge or bleeding from the ear
- Sudden deafness
- Dizziness
- Foreign bodies (you may be advised to attend A&E)
- After using eardrops for the recommended time your symptoms **still** persist

Your GP or practice nurse will look inside your ears to check if they're blocked and might carry out some simple hearing tests.

They may suggest using eardrops for a bit longer, or they may carry out a minor procedure called ear irrigation to clean out your ear canal. This procedure is not without risk and could perforate the ear drum.

If these treatments aren't suitable or do not help, you may be referred to the ENT department of your nearest hospital for more specialised treatments such as microsuction or an aural toilet.