

Ear wax

The ear is made up of three different parts: the outer ear (the part you can see); the middle ear (which is separated from the outer ear by the eardrum and contains tiny bones that amplify sound waves); and the inner ear (where sound waves are translated into electrical impulses and sent to the brain). The ear canal cleans itself with a waxy secretion called cerumen. Sometimes, the wax builds up and causes symptoms, including mild deafness and a sensation of fullness inside the ear. This condition is harmless and easily treated. In some cases, the wax plug loosens and falls out by itself without the need for intervention.

Symptoms

The symptoms of a wax plug within the ear can include:

- Mild deafness
- Earache
- A sensation of fullness inside the ear
- Tinnitus (ringing in the ear)
- Dizziness.

Wax keeps the ears clean

The skin lining the ear canal contains glands that produce cerumen. This yellowish - brown waxy substance protects the tissues, and helps prevent infection by trapping micro-organisms, dirt and other irritants. Wax is constantly travelling towards the outer ear where it can drop out. Actions of the jaw, such as talking and chewing, help to 'massage' the wax out of the canal. The ear wax you see is a combination of cerumen, shed skin cells and dirt.

Risk factors

Some people are more prone to ear wax blockages than others. Reasons for this include:

- A tendency to produce a lot of ear wax.
- Narrow ear canals.
- Hairy ear canals.
- Overzealous cleaning with fingertips or cotton buds, which pushes wax further down the canals.
- Working in dusty or dirty environments.
- Inflammatory conditions of the skin or scalp.

Possible complications

In most cases, blockage of the ear canal with wax is a harmless event.

Diagnosis and treatment options

Your doctor diagnoses the condition by looking into the ear canal with an instrument called an otoscope. Treatment options may include:

- Drops to soften the ear wax and help it to fall out on its own.
- The use of an ear syringe to squirt warm water into the ear canal and float out the wax plug.
- Withdrawal of the wax using a suction device.
- Removing the wax with forceps or a special hook.
- Large quantities of hardened wax may need to be treated by an ear specialist.

Prevention strategies

It is not possible to reduce the amount of ear wax you produce or widen your ear canals. However, there are ways to reduce the incidence of wax build-up, including:

- Use wax-softening drops or oil twice a week, or according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- Avoid cleaning the ear canals with cotton buds or fingertips, as any object poked into the ear can compact the wax.
- Limit ear cleaning to the outer ear only.
- Treat any associated inflammatory skin conditions.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Ear specialist.

Things to remember

- The ear canal cleans itself with a waxy secretion called cerumen.
- Sometimes, the wax builds up and causes symptoms, including mild deafness and a sensation of fullness inside the ear.
- This condition is harmless and easily treated.
- Treatment options include drops to soften the wax, or irrigation of the canal with warm water squirted from a syringe.

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital (RVEEH)

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