
Ear wax

Summary

- 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.
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The ear is made up of three different parts. The outer ear is the part you can see, the middle ear is separated from the outer ear by the eardrum and contains tiny bones that amplify sound waves, and the inner ear is where sound waves are translated into electrical impulses and sent to the brain.

The ear canal cleans itself with a waxy secretion called cerumen. Cerumen is resistant to water, sticky (to trap dust) and migrates out of the ear canal to self-clean the ear.

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 build-up loosens and falls out by itself without the need for intervention.

Symptoms of wax build up

The symptoms of a wax build-up within the ear can include:

- mild deafness
- earache
- a sensation of fullness inside the ear
- tinnitus (ringing in the ear).

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

Wax keeps the ears clean

The skin lining the ear canal contains glands that produce cerumen. This yellow or brown 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 come out. Actions of the jaw, such as talking and chewing, help to move the wax out of the canal. The ear wax you see is a combination of cerumen, shed skin cells and dirt.

Risk factors for ear wax blockage

Some people are more prone to ear wax blockage 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.
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Diagnosis and treatment for ear wax blockage

Your doctor can diagnose ear wax blockage by looking into your ear canal with an instrument called an otoscope.

Treatment may include:

- drops to soften the ear wax and help it to fall out on its own
- the use of an ear syringe by a doctor to squirt warm water into the ear canal and float out the wax plug
- withdrawal of the wax by a doctor, using a suction device
- removal of the wax by a doctor, using forceps or a special hook
- large quantities of hardened wax may need to be treated by an ear specialist.

Prevention of ear wax blockage

It is not possible to reduce the amount of ear wax you produce or to 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 **GP (doctor)**
- **Pharmacist**
- **Audiologist**

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

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