

Earwax

Why does the body produce earwax?

The ear canal is shaped somewhat like an hourglass—narrowing part way down. The skin of the outer part of the canal has special glands that 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 and helps to trap dust and dirt particles to keep them from reaching the eardrum.

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, carrying dirt and dust with it. Usually the wax accumulates a bit, dries out, and then comes out of the ear and is wiped off.

Earwax is not formed in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum. So when a patient has wax blockage against the eardrum, it is often because he has been probing the ear with such things as cotton-tipped applicators, bobby 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 mineral oil, baby oil, glycerin, or commercial drops, such as Debrox® or Murine® Ear Drops in the ear. Rarely, people have allergic reactions to commercial preparations. Several drops of mineral oil placed in the ear with a medicine dropper can keep the wax soft so it comes out by itself.

If there is a possibility of a hole (perforation or puncture) in the eardrum, consult a physician 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.

We do not suggest using hydrogen peroxide or alcohol. 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 infection. 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.

If these things do not help, then make an appointment with your ENT doctor and he/she can clean out your ears.

Why shouldn't cotton swabs be used to clean earwax?

Wax blockage is one of the most common causes of hearing loss. This is often caused by attempts to clean the ear with cotton swabs. Most cleaning attempts merely push the wax deeper into the ear canal, causing a blockage. Good intentions to keep ears clean may be risking the ability to hear. The ear is a delicate area, including the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum. Therefore, special care should be given to this part of the body. So STOP USING cotton-tipped applicators and the habit of probing the ears.

What are the symptoms of wax buildup?

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

Are ear candles an option for removing wax build up?

No, ear candles are not a safe option of wax removal as they may result in serious injury. Some of the most common injuries are burns because users are instructed to insert the wax-impregnated cloth into the ear canal and light the end. Even though ear candling is an ancient practice with the intent to treat a wide variety of ear maladies including cerumen impactions, ear infections, hearing loss, tinnitus, Ménière's disease, sinusitis, headaches, inhalant allergies, and many other conditions. *The FDA has never cleared or approved marketing the products as a medical treatment. In fact, the FDA has undertaken several successful regulatory actions, including ear candle product seizures and injunctions, since 1996.*

In short ENT doctors do not recommend ear candling.

When should a doctor be consulted?

If the home treatments discussed in this leaflet are not satisfactory or if wax has accumulated so much that it blocks the ear canal an otolaryngologist (ENT) may need to remove the wax. Sometimes the doctor has to use a microscope to help visualize the ear.