

# Ear Wax

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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 outer ear cleans itself by producing a waxy secretion called cerumen. This yellowish-brown waxy substance protects the tissues, and helps prevent infection by trapping microorganisms, 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 earwax you see is a combination of cerumen, shed skin cells and dirt.

## Why Does Wax Block My Ear?

Sometimes wax builds up, blocks the ear canal and causes symptoms. Symptoms can include mild deafness, a sensation of fullness inside the ear, earache, tinnitus (ringing in the ear) and sometimes dizziness.

Some people are more prone to earwax blockages than others due to:

- An intrinsic tendency to produce a lot of earwax, or very dry or thick wax that doesn't move efficiently out of the ear canal.
- Narrow ear canals.
- Hairy ear canals.
- Overzealous cleaning with fingertips or cotton buds, which pushes wax further down the canal and promotes overproduction of wax.
- Working in dusty or dirty environments.
- Inflammatory conditions of the skin lining the canal, such as eczema.
- Patients that wear hearing aids, as the aid prevents the natural movement of the wax out of the ear canal opening.
- As we get older our wax gets thicker, making the wax harder to clear, and the outer part of the ear canal tends to collapse, narrowing the part of the canal that the wax needs to get out of.

## Treatment

It's important to remember that having wax in your ears is a good thing. It's a natural moisturiser and antiseptic, and if left alone will usually not block the ear. Children in particular tend to have waxy ears, as their canals are narrow and wax moves quickly through their canals and out into their ear bowl, but in most cases this causes no problem at all if you leave it alone.

It is not possible to reduce the amount of earwax you produce, or widen your ear canals without an operation. In most cases, your natural wax plug loosens and falls out of the ear canal by itself without the need for intervention. However there are ways to reduce the incidence of wax build-up if you tend to get blocked ears as a result, including:

- Use wax-softening drops or oil, according to the manufacturer's instructions. Olive oil, Cerumol, Waxol and Nozoil are good cleaners and softeners.
- Hydrogen peroxide has the advantage of both softening and breaking up wax within the ear canal. If wax softeners are not working, then try this. Please see our Hydrogen Peroxide Information Sheet for further details.
- Avoid cleaning the ear canal with cotton buds, bobby pins etc, as any object poked into the ear will compact the wax. Limit ear cleaning to what you can reach with your finger-tip (not your nail tip).
- Treat any associated inflammatory skin conditions

Large quantities of hardened wax may need to be treated by your family doctor or an ear specialist. They may use a variety of techniques, including syringing, withdrawal of the wax using a suction device, or removing the wax with special instruments.