



ARKANSAS OTOLARYNGOLOGY CENTER

EAR | NOSE | THROAT

Earwax

Why does the body produce earwax?

Cerumen or earwax is healthy in normal amounts. Earwax has 3 important functions:

1. It is an oil that keeps the skin in the ear canal from becoming dry and flakey.
2. It naturally repels water to protect the ear from water exposure during bathing and swimming.
3. It has antibiotic properties that protect the ear from infection.

Earwax is formed in the outer one-third of the ear canal, not 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.

How does earwax get out of the ear?

Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning; that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of earwax and skin cells from the eardrum to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out..

Good intentions to keep ears clean may be risking the ability to hear. The ear is a delicate and intricate area, including the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum. Therefore, special care should be given to this part of the body. Start by discontinuing the use of cotton-tipped applicators and the habit of probing the ears.

When should the ears be cleaned?

Under ideal circumstances, the ear canals should never have to be cleaned. However, that is not always the case. The ears should be cleaned when enough earwax accumulates to cause symptoms or prevents a needed assessment of the ear by your doctor. This condition is called cerumen impaction, and may cause itching, earache, or hearing loss.

What is the recommended method of ear cleaning?

To clean the ears, wash the external ear with a cloth, but do not insert anything into the ear canal.

Sometimes the wax can be softened by placing a few drops of mineral oil, baby oil, glycerin, or commercial drops in the ear. Gentle irrigation with a mixture of acetic acid and alcohol will occasionally remove the softened wax. Caution is advised to avoid

having your ears irrigated if you have a perforated eardrum, tube in the eardrum, diabetes, or a weakened immune system.

Manual removal of earwax may be necessary if the wax buildup is persistent. This is most often performed by an otolaryngologist using suction, special miniature instruments, and a microscope to magnify the ear canal. Manual removal is preferred if your ear canal is narrow, the eardrum has a perforation or tube, other methods have failed, or if you have diabetes or a weakened immune system.

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

The skin in the ear canal is tissue-paper thin. Unlike skin on the rest of the body, the skin in the ear canal grows directly on top of bone or cartilage and it is not padded by an underlying layer of muscle and fat. Even light, gentle pressure with a soft cotton swab can break the skin barrier in the ear canal resulting in a painful outer ear infection, known as otitis externa, or “swimmers ear.”

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.

What can I do to prevent excessive earwax?

There are no proven ways to prevent cerumen impaction, but not inserting cotton-tipped swabs or other objects in the ear canal is strongly advised. If you are prone to repeated wax impaction or use hearing aids, consider seeing your doctor every 6 to 12 months for a checkup and routine preventive cleaning.

If you suffer from chronic itchy ears, your doctor can prescribe a medicated drop to treat the itching.

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 (and hearing), a physician may prescribe eardrops designed to soften wax, or he may wash or vacuum it out. Occasionally, an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist) may need to remove the wax using microscopic visualization.

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 pain or an infection. Certainly, washing water through such a hole could start an infection.