

Ear Wax

Ear wax commonly builds up in the ear canal. It can cause dulled hearing. It can usually be easily removed.

What is ear wax?

Ear wax forms a protective coating of the skin in the ear canal. Small amounts are made all the time. Flakes or crusts of wax break off and fall out of the ear from time to time.

The quantity of ear wax made varies greatly from person to person. Plugs of wax form in some people. This may cause a feeling of fullness and dulled hearing. A doctor or nurse can look into the ear canal and confirm a plug of wax has formed. A plug of wax is not a serious problem, more a nuisance. You only need to remove wax if it is causing symptoms such as dulled hearing, itch, or discomfort.

Removing plugs of ear wax

Ear drops

Ear drops alone will often clear a plug of ear wax. You can buy drops to soften wax (such as sodium bicarbonate) from pharmacies. Pour a few drops into the affected ear. Lie with the affected ear uppermost when putting in drops. Stay like this for 2-3 minutes to allow the drops to soak into the wax. The wax is softened, and it often breaks up if you put drops in 2-3 times a day for a week. Flakes or crusts of wax usually fall out bit by bit.

Ear syringing

This may be needed if ear drops do not work. Syringing will usually clear wax. But, it will usually only work if the wax plug has been softened. Therefore, put wax softening ear drops in 2-3 times a day for 5 days prior to syringing. Ear syringing is usually painless. Lukewarm water is squirted into the ear canal. This dislodges the softened plug which then falls out with the water.

Sometimes you may feel dizzy after ear syringing, but this quickly settles. Some people develop an inflammation in the ear canal following ear syringing. This causes itch and discomfort, but can be treated with ear drops. Rarely, ear syringing can cause serious damage the ear or eardrum.

Ear syringing may not be advised if you have had:

- Previous surgery for some types of ear problems.
- Recurring infection of the ear canal (recurring otitis externa).
- A perforated ear drum.

What not to do

Do not try to clean the ear canal with cotton wool buds, etc. This may make things worse as wax is often pushed deeper inside. It may also cause an ear infection. Let the ear 'clean itself'.