

Ear wax

Information for patients



What is ear wax?

Ear wax is also called cerumen. It is produced by glands in the ear canal where it provides protection by stopping dust, dirt or foreign bodies entering the outerear. It also helps carry dead skin cells and dirt from deep inside the canal to the outside, keeping the ear clean and healthy. This process takes place over about two weeks. The wax also helps fight infection and is needed to keep ears healthy.

Do ears need to be cleaned?

Your ears are self-cleaning, and ear wax should not be routinely removed, allowing it to act in the ear as a protective film. **Do not** use cotton buds (or any other object) to try and remove the wax as this will push the wax further into the ear canal and block your ear. Use of cotton buds can lead to infection and damage the ear.

What can I do if wax is causing a problem?

Self-Care

If you are experiencing ear pain or discharge, please contact your GP. But if you believe that you have reduced hearing due to ear wax, you can use olive oil (or other cooking oil) drops to encourage the natural movement of wax from the ear canal:

- Apply the drops whilst lying on your side with the affected ear upwards. Gently pull the outer ear backwards and upwards first.
- Allow one or two drops to fall into the ear canal and gently massage the area in front of the ear. The oil should be at room temperature.
- Remain lying on your side for 10 minutes to allow the oil to soften the wax.
- After 10 minutes, slowly sit up whilst holding a tissue against your ear to soak up any oil leaking out of the ear canal.
- Repeat this procedure for the other ear if required.

TO INSTIL THE DROPS



Please do this when getting up and going to bed (remembering to lie down afterward for 10 minutes). This needs to be continued for two weeks. Correctly using oil in this way usually clears any blocked-up wax and means that there is no need to contact your GP practice.

An olive oil spray is also available, which avoids the need to lie on your side for 10 minutes. This can be helpful if you find it difficult to lie on one side for prolonged periods. Olive oil drops and spray can be purchased from the pharmacy or supermarket. **Do not** put cotton wool in your ear canal after using the olive oil to retain it, as this may cause infection. Other types of ear drops may be purchased containing sodium bicarbonate or hydrogen peroxide to help break down the wax. Prolonged use of these drops can lead to dryness and irritation of the ear canal, so always follow the recommended use on the packaging.

Do not use oil drops if you have been told you have a perforated ear drum or if you have ever had surgery on your ears that has left a hole in your ear drum or problem with your ear canal. If that is the case, please contact your GP for advice if you are having problems with your ears, or with hearing. Also, do not use oils containing nut oil, if you have a nut allergy.

What to do if self-care does not work.

If self-treatment does not remove the wax, you may need to have ear wax removed by contacting your GP surgery.

However please only do this if:

- You have tried self-care first using oil
- Or you have been advised not to put oil in your ear because of a perforated ear drum or ear surgery.

If you need to undergo ear syringing by a nurse (a method of flushing earwax from your ear), you will need to use oil drops as outlined above for at least 10 days beforehand.

