

Earwax

WHAT IS EARWAX?

Earwax is normal. It protects the inner ear from water and infection. Sometimes, however, the wax builds up and leads to a blockage (impaction).

In some cases, the wax build-up falls out by itself without any treatment. At other times, the build-up needs treatment.

WHAT CAUSES AN EARWAX BUILD-UP?

The outer ear canal is a 3cm-long tunnel that runs from the ear hole to the eardrum. It is lined with skin, hairs and small glands that produce wax.

The wax protects the skin of the ear canal and gives it a waterproof coating. The ear canal has a self-cleaning action that allows the natural removal of the wax.

The earwax you see is a combination of wax, shed skin cells and dirt.

A build-up of earwax can occur at any age. You are more likely to have a wax blockage if you:

- produce a lot of wax
- have narrow ear canals
- have hairy ear canals
- clean your ears with fingertips and cotton buds, which can push wax further down the canal
- work in a dusty environment
- have a skin condition such as eczema or psoriasis.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The symptoms of wax build-up in the ear canal include:

- mild deafness
- earache

- a sensation of fullness in the ear or itchiness
- ringing in the ear (tinnitus).

Some experts believe that earwax may also be associated with 'vertigo' (the sensation that you're moving even when standing still). However, this link is not certain.

Earwax rarely causes ear discharge or pain. In fact you may not be aware that your ear is full of wax until you find it harder to hear or there is a waxy discharge. If an infection develops in the skin under the wax, your ear may feel itchy and sore.

TREATMENT

- You may need to use wax-softening drops such as Waxsol or Cerumol for a few days. Olive oil can also be used. These oils soften the earwax and help it fall out on its own.
- Sometimes a doctor may need to remove excess wax by irrigating the ear with pressurised water. This is not an emergency procedure and is best performed by your local doctor.
- Large amounts of hard wax may need to be treated by an ear specialist. Your doctor can organise a referral for you.

WHAT TO EXPECT

In most cases, earwax causes only mild discomfort. It is easily treated and should not cause any long-term damage. Some people will have ongoing problems with earwax.

Do not try to treat earwax yourself. You might cause an infection in the ear canal or damage your eardrum.

PREVENTION

It is not possible to reduce the amount of wax you produce but there are ways to stop it building up:

- Avoid cleaning the ear canals with your fingertips, cotton buds and other objects.
- Limit ear cleaning to the outer ear only.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

See your local doctor or healthcare professional for other medical problems including:

- any hearing loss
- dizziness
- earache
- pus or blood coming from the ear.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor, pharmacist or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

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