

Ear Wax

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 micro-organisms, 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 ear wax you see is a combination of cerumen, shed skin cells and dirt.

Symptoms and Causes

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 ear wax blockages than others, due to:

- An intrinsic tendency to produce a lot of earwax.
- Narrow ear canals.
- Hairy ear canals.
- Overzealous cleaning with finger tips 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 of the canal.
- Patients that wear hearing aids, as the aid prevents the natural movement of the wax.
- As we get older our wax gets thicker, making the wax harder to clear.

Treatment

This condition is harmless and easily treated. In some cases, the wax plug loosens and falls out by itself without the need for intervention.

It is not possible to reduce the amount of ear wax you produce, or widen your ear canals without an operation. However there are ways to reduce the incidence of wax build-up, including:

- Use wax-softening drops or oil, according to the manufacturer's instructions. Olive oil, hydrogen peroxide, Cerumol, Waxol and Nozoil are good cleaners and softeners.
- Avoid cleaning the ear canal with cotton buds or finger tips, as any object poked into the ear will push the wax in, and compact it. Limit ear cleaning to what you can reach with your finger tip.
- Treat any associated eczema, psoriasis or other dermatitis of the skin of the canal.

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