Ear wax

What is ear wax

Ear wax (also called cerumen) is a natural substance produced by glands in the ear canal. It helps to:

- Clean and protect the ear.
- Trap dust, dirt, and bacteria.
- Prevent irritation and infection.

Most of the time, ear wax moves to the ear opening on its own and falls out without you noticing.

When can ear wax be a problem

Sometimes ear wax builds up and becomes impacted. This can happen if:

- You produce a lot of wax.
- You wear hearing aids or earplugs regularly.
- You use cotton buds, which can push wax further in.

Symptoms of ear wax build-up

- Hearing loss or muffled hearing.
- Fullness or pressure in the ear.
- Tinnitus (ringing or buzzing).
- Earache.
- Itchiness.
- Dizziness (rare).

What not to do

Don’t use cotton buds – they push wax deeper and can damage your ear.

Don’t insert any objects into your ear.

Avoid ear candles – they are not effective and can be dangerous.

Treatment

A pharmacist can advise on a suitable wax-softening product, such as olive-oil drops. Follow that product’s directions rather than using the same dose for every type of drop. Avoid almond oil if you have an almond allergy.

Do not use drops if you have a hole in the eardrum unless a clinician has specifically advised them. Get advice first if you have grommets, previous ear surgery, pain or discharge.

If wax remains blocked, a trained professional can assess whether microsuction, electronic irrigation or removal with an instrument is suitable. These treatments have risks, including discomfort, irritation and dizziness; suitability depends on your ears.

When to see a healthcare professional

Seek urgent assessment the same day if your hearing suddenly drops, especially over 3 days or less. Do not assume this is wax or wait for drops to work.

See a clinician if symptoms have not improved after 5 days, the ear is completely blocked, or you have pain, discharge or uncertainty about the cause.

Preventing ear wax problems

- Don’t clean your ears with cotton buds.
- Ask a pharmacist or clinician whether occasional wax-softening drops are suitable if blockages keep returning.
- Speak to a healthcare provider if you wear hearing aids and have regular wax issues.

About this information

This leaflet explains the condition and common treatment choices. Your care team will advise what is suitable for you. If you have an operation, follow the specific preparation and aftercare instructions provided by your hospital.

Further information

NHS earwax build up

NHS perforated eardrum