

Emmeline Centre

Information on ear wax

What is ear wax?

Wax is a natural secretion of fats and oil produced in the ear and it consists of dead skin, hair and dust. Small amounts are made all the time and they fall out of the ear by migration, a process aided by jaw movement.

Why is it there?

It lubricates, repels water and protects the ear by trapping dust and other particles. It is slightly acidic, giving bactericidal and antifungal properties (protection from bacteria and fungi) and its absence may cause dryness, irritation and itching.

Who suffers from excessive ear wax?

A build-up of wax is more likely to occur in hearing aid users, if there is an anatomical abnormality of the ear canal, and in older adults.

Frequent, zealous use of such instruments as cotton buds, rolled towel ends, hair grips etc can lead to impaction (a build up of wax tightly packed together). A build-up of wax may also occur with anxiety, stress and dietary or hereditary factors.

What can I do if wax builds up?

Do not try to clean the ear canal (the passage leading from the outer ear to the eardrum) with cotton wool buds etc. This can make things worse as you will push some wax deeper inside. It may also cause an ear infection. Let the ear 'clean itself.'

When is intervention necessary?

A plug of wax is not a serious problem, really more of a nuisance. Removal is only necessary to allow examination of the eardrum, if an ear mould impression is to be taken, or if it is causing deafness, pain or other ear related symptoms.

How do you remove wax?

Use of ear drops

Ear drops alone will often clear a plug of wax. It is possible to buy drops from pharmacies. For example, sodium bicarbonate or olive oil can be bought over the counter. Coconut or almond oil may be used as an alternative as long as you do not suffer with a nut allergy. Drops should be instilled three to four times daily into the ear for five to seven days. This will result in the expulsion of the softened, lubricated wax out of the ear canal by the normal migratory process. If pain occurs, stop using the drops.

Insertion of drops into the ear canal

- Warm the drops to room temperature before using. Let the bottle stand in the room for about half an hour.
- Holding the prepared dropper bottle lie on a bed with the affected ear towards the ceiling.
- With one hand, pull the top of the ear upwards and outwards to straighten the ear canal.
- Squeeze one to two drops over the entrance to the ear canal.
- Lie still in that position for five minutes.
- Wipe the excess drops that pool outside the ear.
- Do not insert cotton wool into the entrance of the ear canal as this will absorb the drops.

Microsuction and instrumentation

If ear drops fail to clear the wax, a doctor or a nurse who is expert in the use of microscope will remove the wax by suction and special instruments. The suction generates a loud noise but should not cause any discomfort.

Contact details

The Emmeline Centre

Telephone: 01223 217589 (0800 to 1700)

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For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169

Help with this leaflet:



If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio format, please ask the department to contact Patient Information: 01223 216032 or patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Polish

Jeżeli chciałbyś uzyskać te informacje w innym języku, w dużej czcionce lub w formacie audio, poproś pracownika oddziału o kontakt z biurem Informacji Pacjenta (Patient Information) pod numerem telefonu: 01223 216032 lub pod adresem patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Portuguese

Se precisar desta informação noutra língua, em impressão de letras grandes ou formato áudio, por favor peça ao departamento que contacte a secção de Informação aos Doentes (Patient Information) pelo telefone 01223 216032 ou através do e-mail patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Arabic

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Cantonese

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Turkish

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Urdu

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Bengali

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Document history

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Department	Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 0QQ www.cuh.org.uk
Contact number	01223 217589
Publish/Review date	November 2009/November 2012
File name	Ear_wax.doc
Version number/Ref	3/PIN0785