



Ear Wax - Patient Information Sheet

Ear wax is naturally occurring, it provides protection for your ears against dust, dirt and bacteria and can help to prevent infection. The amount of wax an individual has varies from person to person and depends on environment, diet, and age. In most cases it will not cause any problems and should be left alone without any attempts to remove it. Ear wax only becomes a problem if a build-up is causing symptoms (e.g., deafness, pain) or a health professional needs a clear view of your ear drum.

Advice to help you manage and prevent ear wax blockages:

What you should avoid doing:

- Never use cotton buds or any other object to clean your ears, as it can force the wax deeper into the canal and cause damage, trauma and potentially, an infection.

What can help?

- Try to keep your ears dry. When washing your hair, showering, or swimming use waterproof ear plugs or cover a piece of cotton wool in Vaseline (to waterproof it) and place it into your outer ear.
- Avoid putting your head under the water when bathing.

If you are regularly prone to blocked ears, you can use olive oil or almond oil drops (avoid almond oil if you are allergic to almonds) or spray 2-3 times daily for a minimum of 2-3 weeks. The best way to do this is:

1. Warm the drops to room temperature.
2. Lie on your side with the affected ear uppermost. Concentrate on treating one ear at a time if both ears are blocked with wax.
3. Pull the outer ear gently backwards and upwards to straighten the ear canal.
4. Put 2-3 drops into the affected ear(s) and gently massage just in front of the ear. If needed, ask someone to help you put the drops into your ear.
5. Stay lying on your side for 10 minutes to allow the wax to soak up the drops.
6. Wipe away any excess oil but do not plug your ear with cotton wool, as this simply absorbs the oil.
7. If you have lots of wax build-up you can use oil drops twice a week, long term to prevent recurrence.

Your hearing problem may initially worsen after first starting to use the drops, but in most cases, the wax will soften sufficiently to encourage the wax to come out on its own and your symptoms should improve.



When to seek help:

If you are experiencing **any** of the following symptoms make an appointment at your GP surgery to have your ears examined and appropriately treated.

- Pain
- Discharge or bleeding from the ear
- Sudden deafness
- Dizziness
- Foreign bodies (you may be advised to attend your local emergency department)

In most cases wax should clear naturally, however in certain situations microsuction can be used to remove wax from your ears. The process involves using a small suction tube and probe to gently remove any excess wax from your ears and clear the blockage.

Microsuction is only offered on the NHS under the following circumstances:

- If you have an episode of acute otitis externa (infection of the outer ear) you will be given up to a maximum of three microsuction procedures per year.
- If your ear drum is obscured by wax but needs to be viewed, to establish a diagnosis; and this is the only appropriate procedure.
- If you have a history of one-sided hearing loss and there is a need for wax removal from that or the less affected ear.

OR

You are suffering with significant symptoms due to ear wax build-up, including hearing loss or pain, and ear drops failed to improve your symptoms. AND you met one or more of the following criteria:

- You have previously undergone ear surgery, apart from grommet surgery (if they have been in your ear for less than 18 months).
- You have a history of ear pain and/or middle ear infection in the last 6 weeks.
- You have a retraction pocket (a localized area of the ear drum folded back on itself to form a cavity into the middle ear) or a cholesteatoma (an abnormal collection of skin cells deep inside your ear).
- You have a current perforation (hole in your ear drum) or a history of ear discharge in the past 12 months.
- You have had previous complications including perforation of the ear drum, severe pain, deafness, or vertigo.

If the above criteria are met, you will receive a maximum of two microsuction appointments per year, at no less than 6 monthly intervals. The requirement for these appointments will be reviewed on a regular basis.