

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Ear wax

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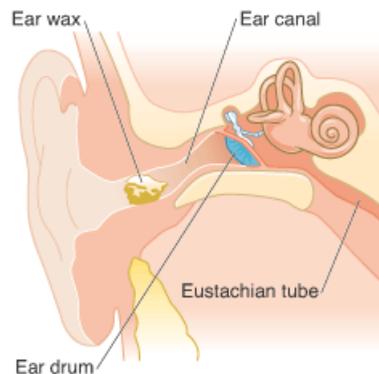
Ear wax

Sometimes ear wax can build up and block your ear. This can stop you hearing properly. If this happens, you'll need to have the wax removed. Usually this is easy and painless.

We've brought together the best research about ear wax build-ups and weighed up the evidence about how to treat them. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is a build-up of ear wax?

We all make ear wax. Normally the wax moves slowly to the outside of your ear where you wash it away. But sometimes the wax builds up and blocks your ear.



If ear wax builds up, it can block your ear canal.

Ear wax helps to stop dirt, dust, and germs getting into your ear. But sometimes the wax builds up and forms a hard layer.

This can block the tube leading into your ear (your ear canal).

This blockage is called an ear wax plug or impacted ear wax.

Sometimes the wax can cover your eardrum. Your eardrum is a thin layer of skin that stretches across the end of your ear canal. It picks up sound from outside. So an ear wax plug may stop you hearing properly. The hearing loss isn't usually serious, but it can be frustrating. ^[1] ^[2]

Ear wax

Some people are more likely to get problems with ear wax. ^[1]

- Wearing a hearing aid or using ear plugs stops the natural flow of ear wax and this can cause wax to build up.
- People who have narrow ear canals are also more likely to get ear wax plugs.
- Men and older people are more likely to get ear wax plugs.

But a build-up of ear wax has nothing to do with poor hygiene. You can't prevent a build-up of ear wax by washing or removing the wax yourself. ^[1]

In fact, you can make the problem worse by trying to remove wax yourself (for example, by using cotton buds). If you try to do this you can push the ear wax further into the ear canal and make it harder to get out. You can also damage your ear canal or eardrum. ^[1]

To read more, see [Looking after your ears](#) .

What are the symptoms of a build-up of ear wax?

If you've got a build-up of ear wax (called an ear wax plug) it can stop you hearing properly. This usually isn't a serious problem, but it can be frustrating.

Your hearing may get steadily worse over time. If the plug completely blocks your ear canal, you may feel as if you've lost most of the hearing in that ear. You may find this annoying. ^[4] Or if you've got ear wax plugs in both ears, you may find it difficult to hold a conversation. ^[4]

You may also: ^[5]

- Get a humming, buzzing, or ringing sound in your ears (tinnitus)
- Get pain in your ear or ears
- Feel dizzy.

An ear wax plug can also increase your chances of getting an ear infection. ^[5]

Your doctor will look into your ear to see whether wax is blocking your ear canal.

How common are problems with ear wax?

Problems caused by ear wax are very common.

In the UK, ear wax is one of the commonest ear problems that people see their GP for. ^[6]

Ear wax

About a third of all older people have problems caused by a build-up of ear wax at some time.^[7]

What treatments work for a build-up of ear wax?

If you have a build-up of ear wax that doesn't go away on its own, you may need to use ear drops or you may need to have your ears syringed. These simple treatments are usually painless.

Key messages about treatment for ear wax

- Ear syringing usually helps to get rid of the ear wax, but it can have side effects. For example, it can cause infections in the outer part of your ear. Or the water squirted into your ear can damage your eardrum. But these problems are rare.
- Ear drops that contain wax softeners are often used to break up the ear wax.
- Your doctor may ask you to use a wax softener for a few days before your ears are syringed. But there hasn't been any good research to show that wax softeners help.

We've looked closely at the research and put the treatments for ear wax build-ups into categories, according to whether they work.

Treatment Group 1

Treatments for ear wax

Treatments that work, but whose harms may outweigh the benefits

- [Ear syringing](#)

Treatments that need further study

- [Removing wax with hooks or suction](#)
- [Wax softeners](#)

Treatments that are likely to be ineffective or harmful

- [Ear candles](#)

What will happen to me?

Most problems caused by ear wax are easy to treat.

In about a third of people with ear wax build-ups (called plugs), the wax goes away on its own after about five days, without any treatment.^[8]

Ear wax

There are things that you should avoid doing. And there are other things that you can do to reduce ear wax building up in your ear. To learn more, see [Looking after your ears](#)

Most ear wax plugs that don't go away on their own can be removed with ear drops or by squirting water into your ear. Squirting water into your ear is called ear syringing. It doesn't usually hurt. But it might not work the first time.

Ear syringing can have side effects.^[9]

- It can lead to **infections** in the outer part of your ear.
- The water that is squirted into your ear can sometimes split your eardrum. We don't know for certain how often this happens, but it's probably only once in every few hundred treatments.

If your hearing doesn't improve after you've been treated for an ear wax plug, your doctor will do more tests to find out what's causing the problem.^[10]

Treatments:

Ear syringing

In this section

There hasn't been any good research on whether ear syringing on its own works to get rid of ear wax that is blocking your ear (ear wax plugs). Even so, most doctors think that this treatment works well.

When you have your ears syringed, a nurse or doctor squirts water into your ear through a tube. This usually weakens and moves the wax. You'll need to hold a small basin under your ear for the water and wax that will come out. It will probably take a few minutes for the plug to be moved.

One small study found that ear syringing removed ear wax in all the people treated.^[11] Putting water in the ear for 15 minutes before syringing made the process much easier. People who had water in their ear before syringing needed to have much less water squirted into their ear for the wax to come out.

The water used is usually warm. But ear syringing can be uncomfortable and can make you feel dizzy.^[12] It shouldn't be painful. Your nurse or doctor may have to stop the treatment and start again, or ask you to come back.

Ear syringing can have side effects. The common ones are:^[13]

- An infection in your ear
- A split eardrum

Ear wax

- Damage to the skin around your ear
- Bleeding
- Pain.

Removing wax with hooks or suction

In this section

If you've got too much wax in your ear, your doctor or nurse may try to remove it with a hook or another instrument. They may also try to clear your ear canal of wax by having it sucked out, using a treatment called micro-suction.

We didn't find any research on these treatments. But most doctors think that they work and can help some people with ear wax build-ups.

One study looked at people who used wax-softening drops and a bulb syringe at home. ^[14] Bulb syringes have a round, plastic section that you squeeze, connected to a tube. They can be used to suck wax out of your ear. The treatment helped, but not as much as syringing by a doctor or nurse. About 7 in 10 people said they were happy with the results of the bulb syringe, compared with almost everyone who had syringing done by a medical professional.

Wax softeners

In this section

You can use simple remedies such as olive oil, almond oil, or sodium bicarbonate dissolved in water to soften wax in your ears. ^[15] You can also get branded drops from a pharmacist. You may wish to use softeners regularly, if you are prone to a build-up of ear wax. Or you might be advised to use them before having your ears syringed.

Some brand names of ear drops you can buy are:

- Cerumol
- Exterol
- Molcer
- Otex
- Waxsol.

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There's some evidence that wax softeners can help to break up ear wax, so that it's easier to remove or comes out on its own. But most of the research is of poor quality. Also, it's not clear which type of softener works best. Using drops of any sort seems to be better than no treatment. Some research has found that drops of sterile water work as well as other products. ^[16] ^[17]

Softeners don't work for everyone. In one study, using wax softeners for five days helped about 1 in 5 people get rid of a build-up of ear wax. ^[8] Only 1 in 20 people who didn't have treatment got rid of the wax build-up.

Wax softeners can sometimes irritate the skin in your ear. Other side effects include increased temporary hearing loss, and dizziness if the drops were too cold. ^[16] Some studies have reported a few people getting pain, stinging, and outer ear infections with certain types of ear drops. ^[17]

Ear candles

In this section

We haven't looked at the research on ear candles in as much detail as we've looked at the research on most of the treatments we cover. (To read more, see Our method.) But we've included some information because you may have heard of this treatment or be interested in it.

Ear candles are hollow tubes or cones covered with wax. One end is put in your ear, and the other end is lit. The flame supposedly creates a vacuum, which helps suck wax out of your ear.

However, one study found that ear candles don't create a vacuum like they're supposed to. ^[18] Some people who used the candles ended up with even more wax in their ears, as candle wax was left behind. The study also found reports of people injured by hot wax from ear candles.

One expert in alternative medicine says that ear candles do more harm than good, and that people are better off avoiding them. ^[19]

Further informations:

Looking after your ears

Don't

- Put anything in your ear to clean it, such as a cotton bud. You can damage the delicate skin in your ear canal or your eardrum. Cleaning the inside of your ear

Ear wax

increases the risk that you'll get an infection. This can make problems with wax worse. ^[3]

Do

- Wash around your ear.
- Put one or two drops of olive oil in your ear if you get a lot of wax. This may help the ear clear itself. ^[3]

Glossary:

infection

You get an infection when bacteria, a fungus, or a virus get into a part of your body where it shouldn't be. For example, an infection in your nose and airways causes the common cold. An infection in your skin can cause rashes such as athlete's foot. The organisms that cause infections are so tiny that you can't see them without a microscope.

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