

Ear Wax Removal Guidance for Patients

Ear wax is a natural build up dead cells, hair, foreign material such as dust, and cerumen.

Normally ear wax causes no or minimal symptoms but occasionally it can cause symptoms such as dulled hearing, earache or vertigo.

If this occurs please do see your pharmacist who can recommend ear wax drops.

We recommend use of an oil based drop (eg olive or almond) initially to soften wax which will enable it to fall out on its own or dissolve. **Please try this for a minimum of 2 weeks.**

If you feel this has not happened: please then try sodium bicarbonate drops for a minimum of 3-5 days.

Warm the drops to room temperature before using them. (Let the bottle stand in the room for about half an hour.) Pour a few drops into the affected ear. Lie with the affected ear uppermost when putting in drops. Stay like this for 2-3 minutes to allow the drops to soak into the earwax. The earwax is softened and it often breaks up if you put drops in 2-3 times a day for 3-7 days. Flakes or crusts of earwax often fall out bit by bit. You may not notice the wax as it comes out of your ear.

You can also consider the use of an ear bulb as a safe, alternate way for to self-manage the removal of ear wax. Bulb syringes can be purchased from a pharmacy

If your symptoms have not improved- please do feel free to book an appointment with a practice nurse or clinician to assess your ear.

They will check your ear to confirm if ear wax is present and advise whether you would be suitable for ear irrigation.

The ear canal is washed out with warm water. Irrigating the ear with water will usually clear plugs of earwax. But it is only safe if the plug of earwax has been softened. Irrigation when the wax is hard increases the risks of perforating the ear drum. **Therefore please continue to use ear drops as above to soften wax before your appointment.**

Ear irrigation is usually painless. Lukewarm water is squirted into the ear canal. This is usually done by a machine that squirts water at the right pressure. This dislodges the softened plug which then falls out with the water.



Note: the old-fashioned big ear syringes have largely been replaced by modern irrigation machines. This is because the machines can deliver the squirt of water at the correct pressure. There is no risk of there being too much pressure applied which may cause damage (a problem with the old-fashioned syringes).

Some people feel dizzy after ear irrigation but this quickly settles. Some people develop an inflammation in the ear canal following ear irrigation. This causes itch and discomfort but can be treated with ear drops. Rarely, ear irrigation can cause damage to the ear or eardrum. Therefore, see a doctor or nurse after ear irrigation if you:

- Develop any ear pain.
- Develop troublesome itch in the ear.
- Develop a discharge from the ear.
- Have swelling of the tissues around the ear canal (which may indicate infection).

Ear irrigation may not be advised if you have certain ear problems. In particular, if you:

- Are under 12
- Have had complications following this procedure in the past.
- Currently have grommets in place. (Grommets are small plastic tubes placed in the eardrums in an operation.)
- Have had ear surgery in the past (apart from grommets that have come out at least 18 months previously and you have been discharged from the hospital ear department).
- Have a cleft palate (even if it has been repaired).
- Have an ear infection or have had an ear infection in the previous six weeks.
- Have recurring infections of the ear canal (recurring otitis externa).
- Have, or have had, a burst (perforated) eardrum.

If ear irrigation does not work after two attempts, or if is not advised, you may be referred to an ear specialist for removal of troublesome earwax.

