

Earwax

Earwax is made up of fats and oils which are produced naturally by glands in the ear in order to protect the sensitive ear drum. It functions to trap particles of dust etc that enter the ear. If you have a very dusty job, your ear will produce more wax, meaning that you are more likely to get a 'blocked' ear.

Who Gets Problems With Wax?

Anyone can, and people vary a lot in how much wax they produce. If there's too much produced, it can block the ear canal, stopping sound waves reaching the ear drum, and/or sometimes making your ear feel sore.

What Symptoms Could I Get?

Reduction in hearing, pain, itching, ringing sounds, or a feeling of pressure in the ear.

What Shouldn't I Do to Remove it?

The skin cells which line the inside of the ear canal are specially designed to grow and move outwards, acting like a conveyor belt which carries ear wax out of the canal into the outside world. This mechanism allows the ear to clear itself, and has worked well throughout millions of years of human evolution. Using cotton buds, matchsticks etc only serves to damage this conveyor belt mechanism, and can push the wax further inside and/or damage the ear drum. They should **never, ever** be used!!

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists now advise that syringing the ear should also be avoided at all costs, unless it is a last resort. This is because the high-pressure water jet needed can cause damage to the sensitive ear drum. It also stimulates the ear canal to produce even more earwax and once again damages the normal mechanism by which the ear clears itself naturally. It therefore becomes a vicious circle of syringing => blockage => syringing => blockage => syringing etc etc.

What Should I Do?

Buy some oily ear drops from the pharmacy. There are several named brands (Otex, Cerumol, Earex), but these are expensive and no better than simple Almond or Olive Oil. You can use oil already in the house, but you will need some means of dropping it into your ear - the pharmacy-bought stuff comes with a dropper. Use it the following way:

- Lie down with the affected ear pointing upwards.
- Add 2-3 drops of oil to the ear canal.
- Stay in that position, with the ear upwards, for about 15 mins to allow the oil to soak into the wax. If you stand up too quickly, or plug the ear with cotton-wool, the oil will simply fall out, or be absorbed by the cotton wool rather than the wax.
- Repeat the above steps twice daily for at least 14 days, by which time the wax should have fully dissolved.

If the wax doesn't come out after 14 days of the above treatment, you can call the local Community Treatment and Care (CTAC) centre on 0131 537 7205 and make an appointment to have the wax flushed out with water (called ear syringing). **This is NOT done here in the practice.**

How Can I Prevent Wax Problems?

Use 2 drops of oil once a week to prevent the wax drying out and solidifying inside the ear canal. If you work in a very dusty environment, or if you swim a lot, consider buying some waterproof ear plugs.