Earwax

If you require this leaflet in other languages or formats please telephone the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on: 01535 294019 for advice.

Please raise any issue you may have about your care and treatment with a member of staff. Raising your concerns will not adversely affect the care you will receive.

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What is earwax?

Earwax is also known as cerumen. It is made up of oil and sweat secreted from glands in your outer ear canal, scales from your skin and dust particles. Earwax helps to keep your ears healthy. It is anti-fungal and antibacterial. Some people feel that they should have their ears cleared regularly, but there is usually no need for earwax to be cleared. You do not need to wash, scrape or poke wax out of your ears because the wax, along with the skin, usually falls out without you noticing it.

Your external ear canal keeps itself clean using a natural process. It takes about two weeks for skin to move outwards from your eardrum to your external ear. This process goes on all the time and means that your ear canal is continually developing a new lining.

What causes a wax blockage?

Occasionally, wax can build up in your ear canal and cause a blockage. A number of things may cause this. For example:

You may find that earwax is more of a problem if you have narrow ear canals, if you work in a dusty or dirty environment, or if you wear earplugs a lot.

If you use a hearing aid, the earmould may interfere with the natural process of skin and wax moving out of your ear. This can cause wax to build up in your ear canal.
Talk to the doctor before syringing

It is important that, before you have your ears syringed, you let the doctor or nurse know if:

- you have had infections of, or injuries to, your ears
- you have had surgery on your ears
- you have tinnitus or hearing loss
- you have a weak or perforated eardrum
- previous ear syringing was not straightforward
- you have any anxieties or questions about syringing.

If you think syringing has not cleared your wax blockage

If your ears have been syringed and you do not feel the wax blockage has cleared, go back to your doctor and discuss it. In a very few cases, ear syringing may not be effective in removing wax.

Poking or scraping your ear canal with a finger, a cotton bud or towel pushes wax further down your ear canal and actually encourages your wax glands to produce more wax.

Men are more likely to get wax blockages than women, and older people are more likely to get them than younger people.

Ear care

If you look after your ears, you can help to prevent wax blockages forming in the first place:

Never poke anything in your ears such as fingers, cotton buds or matches.

Try to avoid very dusty, dirty or smoky places as these things can combine with wax to form a blockage.

Is there a link between a wax blockage and hearing loss?

A wax blockage may give you mild hearing loss. For this to happen the wax has to completely block the canal or press on the eardrum.

Some people ask their GP to syringe their ears again and again, because their hearing is not what it used to be. In most instances they do not have any wax blockage to remove. If you often have difficulty hearing the television or radio, or you miss words in conversation, you may have a hearing loss caused by a condition in the middle or inner ear, rather than excess wax in your ears.
In this case your GP can refer you for a hearing test at a hospital.

You may also have wax which is not actually blocking the ear canal or affecting your hearing. This will not need removing.

**Should I try to remove a wax blockage myself?**

If you think you have a wax blockage in one of your ears, see your GP. Do not use eardrops unless your GP or ear specialist has prescribed them. It is possible to buy products designed to help soften your ear wax. Some of these products may actually irritate your ears and cause inflammation or swelling in the ear canal called otitis externa.

Never use drops if you know your eardrum is perforated. It is often difficult to tell if your eardrum is perforated, so if you are in any doubt, do not put drops into your ear.

Some people recommend using olive oil or sodium bicarbonate – which can be bought over the counter – to soften the wax if you have a history of wax blockages. Again, if you suspect your eardrum is perforated then do not use these treatments.

If you do decide to use olive oil or sodium bicarbonate, they may help the wax to work its way out of your ear. Use two to three drops per day in the ear that is blocked, for a maximum of 10 days, and then contact your GP to have your blocked ear examined. If your GP suggests that you need your ears syringed, the wax may come out more easily because you have softened it.

**What ear syringing involves**

Ear syringing should be carried out with a pulsed water-jet system using a narrow tube connected to an electric pump, particularly the first time your ears are syringed.

You may find that some medical practitioners still use a metal or chrome syringe, which looks like a small bicycle pump. The metal syringe and pulsed water-jet system both use water to try to move the wax and clear the ear. But the use of a metal syringe is no longer a recommended method, as it is much less controlled than using a pulsed water-jet system, and it has been known to damage people’s ears.

Although you may find it difficult to question the doctor, make sure you find out what method they will use to syringe your ears before syringing takes place. If the doctor is going to use a metal syringe, you should say quite firmly that you want them to use the pulsed water-jet system. You should also feel free to get a second opinion.

**Other ways of removing wax**

A doctor or nurse using a 'dry' suction clearance method, wax hook, curette or probe can also remove wax. This is usually only done at the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department in a hospital and requires a microscope to be really safe.

You may find that alternative therapists suggest using ear candles to remove wax. There is no evidence to suggest that they work. You should also be aware that potentially they could be dangerous because they involve holding a lighted candle very close to your ear.