

Earwax Management

The American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS), the national association of physicians who treat the ear, nose, throat and related areas, offers the following tips for earwax management.

The skin of the outer part of the ear canal has special glands that produce earwax. This wax helps to protect the soft, vulnerable skin that lines our ear canal and is supposed to trap dust and sand particles to keep them from reaching the eardrum. Usually the wax accumulates a bit, and then dries up and comes tumbling out of the ear, carrying sand and dust with it. Or it may slowly migrate to the outside where it is wiped off.

Should you clean your ears?

Wax is not formed in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum, but only in the outer part of the canal. So when a patient has wax blocked up against the eardrum, it is often because he has been probing his ear with such things as Q-tips, bobby pins or twisted napkin corners. Such objects only serve as ramrods to push the wax in deeper. Also, the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum is very thin and fragile and is easily injured.

Earwax is healthy in normal amounts and serves to coat the skin of the ear canal where it acts as a temporary water repellent. The absence of earwax may result in dry, itchy ears.

Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning, that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of ear canal skin from the eardrum to the ear opening. Old earwax is constantly being transported from the ear canal to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

When wax has accumulated too much that it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), your physician may have to wash it out, vacuum it, or remove it with special instruments. Or he may prescribe eardrops, which are designed to soften the wax. If so, you may first wish to try over-the-counter products such as Debrox, or Murine Ear Drops. They are not as strong as the prescription wax softeners but are effective for many patients. Putting eardrop products or washing water in your ear in the presence of an eardrum perforation (hole) may cause an infection.

The key to cerumen management is prevention of wax buildup. In our office, we have found that recurrent problems can sometimes resolve with regular use of mineral or baby oil. We suggest using a medicine dropper to put mineral oil or baby oil in your ears two times per week.

For more information:

American Speech-Language Hearing Association
www.asha.org

University of Iowa Health Care
www.uihealthcare.com/topics/earnosethroat/earn4453.html