



## Ear Wax

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### Why do we have ear wax?

Ear wax is a healthy normal substance that keeps our ear canals healthy. It is part of our immune system and allows our ears to clean themselves. Wax repels water, has anti-bacterial properties and stops dirt, dust and other debris getting farther into the ear.

Our ears have a self-cleaning mechanism that slowly expels wax from the ear. The skin in the ear canal very slowly migrates outwards, carrying the wax and any trapped debris with it.

### What will happen if I do not clean my ear canals?

In almost every case, the ear's self-cleaning mechanism will clear wax from your ear canals at a slow but steady rate, preventing excessive wax build-up, but keeping your ears healthy.

### How should I clear out ear wax?

Usually the best treatment to prevent excessive wax is to simply leave your ears alone and allow them to self-clean. It is especially important to avoid using cotton buds or other implements in your ears (see below).

Some people do need wax cleared out for various reasons, including some hearing aid users and people who have had radiotherapy or ear surgery.

If wax is causing a problem, there are several ways to remove it:

- Wax dissolving drops - you can buy these over the counter at most pharmacies. Olive oil is another alternative, though it is less effective.
- Ear syringing - this can often be done at your GP clinic
- Ear suctioning - this is performed with specialised equipment, including a microscope, by ENT Surgeons and Ear Nurse Specialists. It is the safest way to clean ears, but the most expensive and can be a little uncomfortable.

### What is wrong with using cotton buds?

- Cotton buds are a frequent cause of excessive wax and ear problems. They remove only a small amount of wax from the ears, pushing most of the wax deeper into the ear canal where the ear's self-cleaning mechanism cannot clear it out. Worse still are the hundreds of tiny scratches cotton buds cause, which lead to irritation and entry points for bacteria to cause painful infections (otitis externa).
- Irritation from cotton bud use is a very common cause of chronically itchy and uncomfortable ears. Other implements such as bobby pins and paper clips can be just as harmful. The discomfort and irritation will not stop if there is ongoing cotton bud use.