

 Leaflet: EarWax

## Ear Wax

Small amounts of ear wax are made all the time. Wax forms a protective coating of the skin in the ear canal. Flakes or crusts of wax break off and fall out of the ear from time to time. Some people make more wax than others. In some people the wax forms a plug. This happens more easily in people with narrow ear canals. Further wax is gradually added to a wax plug. Eventually this may cause a feeling of fullness in the ear. Dulled hearing may result, particularly if the plug extends right up to the eardrum. Plugs of wax can easily be confirmed by a doctor or nurse looking into the ear. A plug of ear wax is not a serious problem, more a nuisance. Ear wax needs only be removed if it is causing symptoms such as dulled hearing.

### Removing plugs of ear wax

- ◆ Ear drops will often clear a plug of ear wax.
- ◆ Ear syringing may be required only if ear drops do not work.

#### *Ear drops*

Ear drops to soften wax are commonly available from pharmacies. Olive oil used for cooking is just as effective. A traditional remedy is to pour a few drops of olive oil, warmed on a warm spoon, into the affected ear. The wax is softened and it often breaks up if drops are put in 2-3 times a day for a week. Flakes or crusts of wax usually fall out bit by bit. Put drops in correctly for best chance of success. This means tilting your head or lying on your side for at least 2 minutes after putting in drops. This allows time for the drops to soak into the wax.

#### *Ear syringing*

Syringing will usually clear wax if drops alone are not successful. Syringing is usually successful only if the wax plug has been softened. Therefore, ear drops (see above) need to be put in 2-3 times a day for 5 days prior to syringing. Ear syringing is usually painless. Lukewarm water is squirted into the ear. This dislodges the softened plug which then falls out with the water. Sometimes slight dizziness occurs after ear syringing which quickly settles. Ear syringing is best avoided in people with the following.

- ◆ Previous surgery for some ear problems. It depends what the operation was for. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have had an ear operation in the past.
- ◆ Recurring ear canal infections (otitis externa).
- ◆ A perforated ear drum.

### What not to do

Do not try to clean the ear canal with cotton wool buds etc. This often has the opposite effect and wax is pushed deeper inside. It may also cause an ear infection. Let the ear 'clean itself'.

### Preventing a build up of ear wax

Some people are prone to developing wax plugs. A build up of ear wax may be prevented by putting some wax softening drops in each ear once or twice a week.

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