

Patient information from BMJ

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Ear wax

Ear wax is not a problem unless it builds up and blocks your ear. But if this happens it can stop you from hearing properly. You'll need to see a doctor or nurse to have the wax removed. Usually this is easy and painless.

What happens?

We all make ear wax. Usually the wax moves slowly to the outside of your ear where you wash it away. But the wax can sometimes build up and block your ear.

Sometimes a build-up of wax can cover your eardrum and make it hard to hear. Your eardrum is a thin layer of skin that stretches across the end of your ear canal. It picks up sound from outside.

You are more likely to get problems with ear wax if you wear a hearing aid or use ear plugs. These can stop the natural flow of ear wax, causing it to build up.

Trying to remove wax yourself with cotton buds or anything else can make the problem worse. You might push the ear wax further into the ear canal and make it harder to get out. You might also damage your ear.

What are the symptoms?

If you have a build-up of wax in your ear you may be unable to hear properly through that ear. If you have a build-up in both ears you may find it difficult to hold a conversation.

You may also:

- have humming, buzzing, or ringing in your ear (tinnitus)
- have pain in your ear
- feel dizzy.

Your doctor will look into your ear to see whether wax is blocking your ear canal.

What treatments work?

Ear irrigation

If ear wax is causing you problems your doctor might suggest that you have your ears irrigated. To do this, a nurse or doctor squirts warm water into your ear through a tube. This should weaken and move the wax.

You hold a small basin under your ear for the water and wax that comes out. It will probably take a few minutes for the plug of ear wax to be moved.

Ear irrigation works well. Your doctor may give you ear drops to soften the wax before syringing.

Ear irrigation isn't usually painful. But it can be quite uncomfortable and can make you feel dizzy. Sometimes ear irrigation doesn't work at first, so your doctor or nurse may need to do it again.

Other treatments

If you have a hole in your eardrum, or if ear irrigation has not worked, your doctor or nurse may remove the ear wax using small instruments or suction devices.

What will happen to me?

About a third of people with ear wax plugs find that the wax goes away on its own after about five days without any treatment. But if your ear or ears are still blocked, the wax can probably be removed with ear irrigation.

If your hearing doesn't improve after you've been treated for an ear wax plug, your doctor will do more tests to find out what's causing the problem.

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