

## Understanding Earwax

### Tips for properly cleaning your ears — with and without professional help

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**E**arwax, technically called cerumen (sa-roo-men), is a sticky liquid discharged by glands in the ear canal. Earwax helps keep the ears clean and lubricated, and normally moves out of the ear by itself. But, sometimes it builds up, blocks the canal and causes hearing problems.

People who tend to have excessive earwax are the elderly, those with developmental disabilities, people who use cotton swabs in their ears, and people who use hearing aids or earplugs.

If your ears feel “plugged up” or you can’t hear as well as usual, you might need to see your doctor or other healthcare provider to have the excess wax removed.

Don’t try to remove earwax by using cotton swabs or other objects to “dig it out” of your ear canal because using these things may push the wax further into the ear canal or cause serious damage to the ear canal and/or eardrum.

When you visit your healthcare provider, you will be asked about your ear, hearing ability and general health history. Then

the provider will look inside your ear to check for any physical problems, redness or swelling, and to see the amount of earwax and where it is in your ear.

### Ear Drops

Your healthcare provider may recommend you use over-the-counter ear drops to help soften the wax so it comes out of your ear naturally. If you use over-the-counter earwax removal drops, be sure to follow the directions on the package.

Most ear drop instructions will tell you to lie down or tilt your head so the affected ear faces up. Gently pull the earlobe up and back to straighten the ear canal. Drop the medicine into the ear canal. Keep the ear facing up for several minutes so the medicine can flow to the bottom of the ear canal. You may want to put a small, clean cotton ball over your ear canal to keep the drops from leaking out. To prevent germs from contaminating the medicine, do not touch the applicator to any surface, including the insides of your ear. Keep the container tightly closed.

You can remove any wax left in your ear after using the medicine by gently flushing your ear with warm water, using a soft rubber bulb ear syringe you can buy at most drug stores.

### Removal by Healthcare Provider

Your healthcare provider may decide to remove the wax during your office visit.

To start, you will be draped or covered to protect your clothing. The provider will use an irrigator, which squirts water often mixed with a cleaning solution into your ear, to wash out your ear canal. The water will be warm enough to keep you comfortable and effectively remove the earwax.

A suctioning device also may be used to help remove larger earwax particles and water. Suctioning may be noisy because water is sucked into a small tube inserted into the ear.

Your healthcare provider may use other instruments to help remove wax from your ear. Some of these are stainless steel or disposable curettes, spoons and forceps. These instruments are made in different sizes to fit into all sizes of ear canals and to ensure you, the patient, remain comfortable.

### Controlling Earwax

After cleaning your ears, your healthcare provider will offer you some tips to keep your earwax under control. Remember, earwax is natural and needed for a healthy ear. n

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