



Having Your Ears Cleaned

Earwax, or cerumen as it is medically known, is a natural substance produced by the ear canal of humans and many other mammals. The exact function of earwax is disputed. Earwax probably plays a role in cleanliness, hygiene and overall health of the outer ear. In most people the presence of earwax goes unnoticed and does not cause any issues in daily life. In some people however, the amount of earwax inside the canal can become excessive and impacted. This can be due to several reasons:

- The lining of the ear canal no longer migrates outwards when it sheds. The stopping of this conveyor belt motion of the skin means the earwax becomes trapped inside the ear.
- The anatomy of the ear canal does not lend well to migration of earwax e.g., the ear canal may be too narrow.
- The inappropriate use of cotton/ear buds, or regular wearing of hearing aids and ear plugs can push and impact the earwax deep in the ear canal.
- The presence of hard dry earwax, which is more common in older people, can impact inside the ear canal.

How do I know if I have problems with ear wax?

If excessive and/or impacted earwax is left untreated it can cause many symptoms. Symptoms of possible problematic earwax include:

- Hearing loss
- A blocked sensation/ occlusion: internal sounds such as chewing, breathing, heartbeat and your own voice can no longer escape out the ear canal due to ear wax and are, therefore heard much louder in your head.
- Tinnitus: a ringing/ whistling/buzzing type of sound that originates from inside your head, only heard by yourself.
- Vertigo: some people can experience vertigo (spinning dizziness), which improves with removal of ear wax.
- Coughing: irritation of ear canal can cause coughing.
- Interference with hearing aid: sounds being amplified by the hearing aid are reflected back out of the ear by the ear wax causing acoustic feedback (e.g., whistling) of the hearing aid. The ear wax can block the hearing aid tubing.
- Itchiness/ irritation: excess ear wax can contribute to itchiness and irritation of the outer ear canal (otitis externa).

If earwax is causing any of these problems, then its removal should result in an improvement. Besides earwax there are other possible reasons for the problems above.

How do I treat earwax problems?

In most people earwax causes no problems, migrates out naturally and falls out of the ear. In most people there is no need to clean the ear with things such as cotton tipped ear buds. Ear buds will in fact cause some earwax to be pushed into the deep ear canal and encourage impaction/ blockage of earwax. If earwax does cause problems, there are several ways to deal with it.

Eardrops: Eardrops can help soften or disperse earwax. Broadly earwax drops are divided into water-based drops (e.g., Bicarbonate eardrops) or oily ear drops (e.g., Olive oil drops). The water-based ear drops can dissolve ear wax. While oil-based eardrops tend to soften the ear wax. Either type can help the ear wax impaction. If you have an eardrum perforation (a hole in the eardrum) oil-based drops and some water-based drops should not be used. Bicarbonate eardrops are not known to be dangerous but may be uncomfortable if you have any eardrum perforation (it can also trigger infection).

Ear irrigation/ syringing: This involves squirting a liquid into the ear canal to wash away earwax. This is performed by a trained professional. It is effective, however there are situations when ear irrigation should not be used.

- History of perforated ear drum
- Recently perforated ear drum
- Very narrow ear canal
- Previous mastoid or middle ear surgery
- Infections of the ear
- Previous problems with ear syringing/ irrigation
- Sensitive ear (e.g., with pain)
- Moderate or severe tinnitus that is made louder with noise exposure.

This treatment usually takes between 15 – 30 minutes and is available with Chelsea Nursing Service and will be recommended following assessment of your case on an individual basis.

Microscopic earwax removal: This involves using a microscope outside the ear canal to magnify the view of the ear canal. Instruments or suction are used to remove the earwax. With the appropriate training and equipment this technique is effective. In cases of people with sensitive ears or significant tinnitus that is made louder from noise exposure. The noise from suction may become uncomfortable, in this case special instruments can be used to remove the wax.

This treatment is not available with Chelsea Nursing Service as it involves a fixed ENT microscope which is not portable.

Endoscopic earwax removal: This is like microscopic earwax removal, but an endoscope (an instrument used to look into a part of the body) is used to view the ear canal. The tip of this is placed into the ear canal allowing a significantly wider view of the external ear canal and eardrum. Instruments and suction are used to remove the wax.

The procedure will usually take around 15-30 minutes and is available with Chelsea Nursing Service.

Occasionally not all the ear wax can be removed, for example if it is very hard. In this case it may be necessary to soften the earwax with some drops and return at a later date to have the ear cleared of earwax.

No single technique is 100% successful every time and in some people the combination of different techniques may be required to remove the wax. Occasionally the earwax cannot be successfully removed. Assessment by your GP or an ear surgeon may be required.

It is usually not necessary or desirable/ safe to remove 100% of all ear wax from the ear canal. Any ear wax left may not cause any problems and migrate out naturally.

Earwax can be often removed without any prior treatment. Occasionally, if there is a large quantity of hard earwax, removal can be difficult. Earwax, which is hard, can be softened with bicarbonate ear drops. These can be obtained from most pharmacies. Three to four drops can be applied 3 times a day (a left in place for 10 minutes whilst lying on your side) for 3 days prior to earwax removal. Bicarbonate eardrops can cause earwax to expand blocking the ear canal. Once the ear canal has been cleared this sensation of blockage will resolve. Some people can have sensitive ear canals and maybe irritated by bicarbonate ear drops. An alternative such as olive oil drops can be used.

What problems can be caused by treatment for ear wax?

Ear wax removal is generally very safe. Occasionally problems can arise either immediately or within a few days of the earwax removal. If you experience problems in the days after earwax removal, please contact please contact your ear care practitioner for advice and make an appointment to see your GP urgently.

Eardrops: Ear drops are not always effective. In some patients eardrops can cause discomfort or trigger infection.

Ear syringing/ irrigation: Ear syringing is an outdated technique using a syringe where the pressure depends very much on the practitioner. This has been replaced by ear irrigation which utilises a machine to deliver a controlled and regulated flow of water to flush out earwax. However, in some cases ear syringing/ irrigation can cause problems.

These include:

- Ear canal infection (otitis externa)
- Ear syringing/ irrigation can cause a loud noise which in rare cases can cause hearing loss and tinnitus.
- The eardrum may perforate, if already weak, causing ear pain, bleeding and in some cases hearing loss, tinnitus and dizziness.
- In cases of people with sensitive ears or significant tinnitus that is made louder with noise exposure, the noise from ear syringing may be uncomfortable.
- Occasionally the ear wax cannot be removed. This may occur if the ear canal is completely full of hard wax. It may be necessary for the earwax to be softened with eardrops before a further attempt is made at clearing the wax at a different time.

Microscopic/ endoscopic ear wax removal: Occasionally microscopic/ endoscopic wax removal can cause problems.

These include:

- Ear canal damage which can cause bleeding, bruising, pain or infection.
- If micro suction is used a loud noise can be generated in the ear canal. Very rarely this can cause hearing loss or tinnitus.
- It is extremely rare for the ear drum to perforate. If this does occur it can cause ear pain, bleeding and in some cases hearing loss, tinnitus and dizziness. The eardrum in most cases will heal itself. Occasionally an operation to repair the eardrum may be necessary.
- In cases of people with sensitive ear or significant tinnitus, which is made louder with noise exposure, the noise from micro suction may be uncomfortable.
- Occasionally ear wax cannot be removed. This may occur if the ear canal is completely full of hard wax. It may be necessary for the earwax to be softened with eardrops and a further attempt made at clearing the wax at a different time.

My ear problem is still there after the earwax was removed. What should I do?

Sometimes people have another reason besides earwax causing the sensation of blockage in their ear. This can be due to problems behind the eardrum in the middle ear such as fluid or glue ear. Sometimes the inner ear or hearing nerve is not working properly. This will require further assessment, please book an appointment with your GP.

How often do I need to have my ears cleaned?

Most people's ears clean themselves. It is not necessary to have the ear cleaned at a fixed interval since each person's ear will require different intervals. Once symptoms of blocked ear return you can book for an assessment and treatment.

What happens if I do not have my ears cleaned?

If the earwax is not causing any problems, then no harm will come if the earwax is left alone. If the earwax is causing problems such as blockage or hearing loss, then the problem may persist until the earwax is removed. Occasionally even if the ear wax is causing problems, if left alone it may migrate out naturally overtime and the problem resolves.

If you have any questions, please contact Josephine at Chelsea Nursing Service on 07920 859486 or email chesleanursingservice@hotmail.com for further information.