

Ear Wax Self Care Guide

What is ear wax?

Ear wax is normal and is produced to form a protective coating over the skin in the ear canal. Ears are normally self-cleaning – the movement of your jaw whilst eating and talking helps to move the wax along the canal where it will usually fall out naturally without you noticing.

Common symptoms associated with ear wax build up are:

- Hearing loss
- Blocked ears
- Ear discomfort
- Feeling of fullness in the ear

Why is my ear blocked with wax?

The amount of ear wax produced varies from person to person; some people produce excessive amounts which can potentially lead to a blockage in the ear canal.

You are more likely to develop a blockage of wax in the ear canal if you:

- use cotton ear buds to clean the ear as this pushes the wax deeper into the canal
- wear a hearing aid, ear plugs or use in-ear speakers for i-pods or similar - these can all interfere with the natural process of wax expulsion
- have abnormally narrow ear canals
- have a particularly hairy ear canal
- are elderly because the ear wax you produce is drier and harder
- have a dry skin problem such as eczema or psoriasis

Ear wax only becomes a problem if it causes deafness or discomfort and most patients can successfully manage the problem through following the **self-care options outlined overleaf**.

If your ears are regularly becoming blocked with wax, after clearing the blockage we will usually suggest you use olive oil drops as above around **once per week** to keep the wax soft and encourage the natural process of wax expulsion.

There may be instances where patients require more advanced treatment (e.g. certain chronic skin conditions, anatomical abnormalities). This would be assessed by your GP who can refer to the appropriate service.

If you experience any of the following symptoms, you should seek advice from NHS 111, your GP practice or your hearing service who will advise you on the best course of action:

- pain
- discharge or bleeding from the ear
- sudden deafness or buzzing
- foreign body in the ear
- dizziness

We do not offer Ear Syringing – There is an unacceptably high risk of complications occurring - such as a perforated ear drum, middle ear infection, external canal infection or causing ringing in the ear (tinnitus). It is also the most common cause of litigation against nurses working in general practice & is not funded by the NHS.

Self-Care Pathway:**Step 1 - Olive Oil drops**

The following needs to be done 2 - 3 times daily for up to 14 days.

1. Lie on your side with the affected ear uppermost
2. Pull the outer ear gently backwards and upwards to straighten the ear canal
3. Put 2-3 drops of olive oil into the affected ear(s) and gently massage just in front of the ear
4. Stay laying on your side to allow the wax to soak in for around 10 mins
5. Afterwards, wipe away any excess oil but do not plug your ear with cotton wool as this simply absorbs the oil

Your hearing problem may initially worsen after first starting to use the olive oil drops; this is why we advise you to concentrate on treating one ear at a time if both ears are blocked with wax.

In most cases, after 14 days, the wax will have softened sufficiently to encourage the wax to come out without further intervention.

Step 2 – Sodium Bicarbonate drops

If the ear wax has not cleared up, follow the same procedure as above for 3 – 4 days using Sodium Bicarbonate drops, which can be obtained from your local pharmacy.

Step 3 – Bulb syringe

If your ear is still not clear, cleanse the ear canal of any remaining ear wax or drops by using the bulb syringe as follows:

1. Fill bulb syringe with warm water. Please do not use either very cold water or very hot.
2. Gently position the nozzle of the bulb syringe into the opening of the ear canal but no further.
3. Cleanse the ear canal by gently squeezing the bulb, allowing the rinse water to run out of the ear into a
4. wash basin.

A Bulb syringe can be obtained from various sources but your community pharmacy may be able to order these for you and advise on safe use.