

Patient information factsheet

Managing your child's earwax at home

This factsheet contains information about earwax and ways that you can manage your child's earwax safely at home. We hope it helps to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us using the details at the end of this factsheet.

What is earwax?

Earwax (medically known as cerumen) is a waxy substance found in everyone's ears. It is produced by glands in the ear canal (the area between the outer ear and the eardrum).

Earwax helps to keep ears healthy and clean by:

- trapping dirt and dust so that it does not enter the ear
- protecting and moisturising the lining of the ear
- protecting against infection (earwax is slightly acidic so it naturally helps to protect the ear from infection)

Ears produce earwax all the time. To avoid a build-up of wax, the skin in the ear uses a special self-cleaning mechanism to gradually move earwax from the ear canal to the entrance of the ear, which will then fall out naturally. This movement of wax is also helped by the action of chewing and talking.

The colour, consistency and amount of earwax produced by people varies widely. Wax can be:

- dry and flaky
- crumbly
- very hard (it can become quite firmly attached to the underlying skin in your ear)
- pale and honey-coloured
- very dark brown

Is earwax a problem?

For most people, earwax will not cause any problems and should be left alone without any attempts to remove it. However, sometimes earwax can build up and cause hearing loss or problems with hearing aids. If this happens, your child may need some form of treatment to help manage the wax.

Why does my child have a wax build-up?

Some people naturally have more wax than others. Your child may also be more likely to have a build-up of wax in their ears if they:

- have a dry or flaky skin condition
- attempt to clean their ears with cotton buds (this pushes the wax together into hard lumps and can also damage the skin in the ear canal)
- use earplugs or in-ear-earphones regularly (this tends to push the wax down into the ears)
- have hearing aid earmoulds (these can push wax deep into the ear canal and prevent it from coming out naturally)

What can I do to get rid of my child's wax build-up?

To break down and disperse the wax build-up, you will need to use wax-softening drops or sprays. You can use either:

- olive oil drops or olive oil spray (such as Earol) or
- sodium bicarbonate drops (5%).

Follow the instructions on the packaging carefully. These instructions will tell you how often to apply the drops and for how long. You can find these drops in any pharmacy, and you do not need a prescription for them. Alternatively, your child's general practitioner (GP) may be able to provide you with a prescription.

It is important that you **do not** use ear drops or ear sprays if your child has an ear infection, has grommets (tiny tubes inserted into the eardrum which allow air to pass through the eardrum), or has a hole (perforation) in their eardrum. If any of these apply to your child, please contact us for advice.

You should not:

- use cotton buds to clean your child's ears (this will push wax further into the ear, making it worse and can even cause hearing loss)
- remove the earwax by yourself, especially with any unconventional methods, such as candles, cotton buds, tools (these are extremely dangerous and may cause permanent damage to your child's ear)

Please note that we do not offer wax removal services for children unless the wax is causing hearing loss or is preventing them using hearing aids.

Tips for using ear drops or sprays

- You can use either drops or a spray. If drops don't seem to be working, try a spray instead.
- If you have tried olive oil in your child's ears in the past and it hasn't worked, try sodium bicarbonate instead. If sodium bicarbonate hasn't worked in the past, try olive oil.
- The drops need to go fully into the ear canal so that they make contact with the wax. To do this, follow the steps below:
 1. Ask your child to lie on their side (you may find this is easiest while they are distracted, for example watching television).
 2. Place the drops into the entrance of their ear canal.
 3. Massage their outer ear.
- If your child uses hearing aids, apply the drops before bed so that they will not need to use their hearing aids for a while after applying the drops.
- If your child dislikes having drops put in their ear, try applying them while they sleep at night.
- Wax-softening drops take time and perseverance. Please be aware that the drops will not immediately get rid of your child's earwax build-up.

Are there any side effects to using wax-softening drops or sprays?

Wax-softening drops and sprays are generally safe to use (unless your child has an ear infection, grommets or a perforation in their eardrum). However, possible side effects that your child may experience, include:

- a temporary change or loss to their hearing (this is caused by the wax expanding before it breaks down)
- a dry ear canal (if you are using sodium bicarbonate drops, make sure to follow the instructions on the packaging and do not use them for longer than is recommended)

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Contact us

If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us.

Audiology department

Telephone: **023 8120 2997**

Email: rshaudiology@uhs.nhs.uk

Useful links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/earwax-build-up

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