

Earwax

What is earwax?

Earwax is normal. It protects the inner ear from water and infection. Sometimes, however, the wax builds up and leads to a blockage (*impaction*).

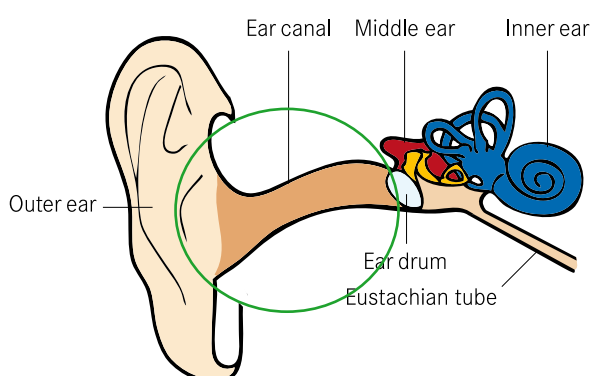
In some cases the wax plug falls out by itself without any treatment. At other times, the build-up needs treatment.

What causes an earwax build-up?

The outer ear canal is a 3 cm long tunnel that runs from the ear hole to the eardrum. It is lined with skin, hairs and small glands that produce wax.

The wax protects the skin of the ear canal and gives it a waterproof coating. The ear canal has a self-cleaning action that allows the natural removal of the wax.

The earwax you see is a combination of wax, shed skin cells and dirt.



A build-up of earwax can occur at any age. You are more likely to have a wax blockage if you:

- produce a lot of wax
- have narrow ear canals
- have hairy ear canals
- clean your ears with fingertips and cotton buds, which can push wax further down the canal
- work in a dusty environment
- have a skin condition such as *eczema* or *psoriasis*.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of a wax plug in the ear canal include:

- mild deafness
- ear ache
- a sensation of fullness in the ear
- ringing in the ear (*tinnitus*)
- dizziness (*vertigo*).

Earwax rarely causes ear discharge or pain. In fact you may not be aware that your ear is full of wax until you find it harder to hear or there is a waxy discharge. If an infection develops in the skin under the wax, your ear may feel itchy and sore.

Treatment

- You may need to use wax-softening drops such as *Waxsol* or *Cerumol* for a few days. Olive oil can also be used. These oils soften the earwax and help it fall out on its own. When you put the drops in, lie with the ear containing the drops facing upwards for five to ten minutes. Some people find that the drops cause a burning sensation. If pain occurs, stop using the drops and see your local doctor.
- After a few days a doctor can remove excess wax by syringing the ear with water, using a suction device or cleaning it out with a fine probe. **This is not an emergency procedure and is best performed by your local doctor.**
- Large amounts of hard wax may need to be treated by an ear specialist. Your doctor can organise a referral for you.

What to expect

In most cases, earwax causes only mild discomfort. It is easily treated and should not cause any long-term damage. Some people will have ongoing problems with earwax.

Do not try to treat earwax yourself. You might cause an infection in the ear canal or damage your eardrum.

Prevention

It is not possible to reduce the amount of wax you produce but there are ways to stop it building up.

- Use wax softening drops or oil twice a week, or according to your doctor's instructions.
- Avoid cleaning the ear canals with your fingertips, cotton buds and other objects.
- Limit ear cleaning to the outer ear only.



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Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



See your local doctor or health care professional for other medical problems, including:

- any hearing loss
- dizziness
- ear ache
- pus or blood coming from the ear.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

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- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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