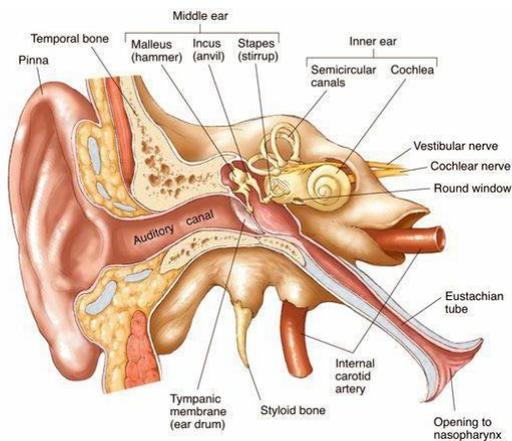


# Care of your Ears

If there is a build-up of wax in your ear(s) please read the following self-help guide.

## What is ear wax?



Ear wax is normal and is produced to form a **protective** coating over the skin in the outer 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. If ear wax is not causing any problems, it should be left alone!

Common symptoms associated with excess 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 buds to clean the ear as this pushes the wax deeper into the canal – *Never put one in your ear!*
- 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 an untreated 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 below.

**If you are experiencing a discharge or blood coming from the ear, sudden deafness, a foreign body in the ear or have a fever and ear pain, you could have a more serious ear problem and will need to speak to a GP or call NHS 111 if out of GP opening hours.**

**Ear Syringing or irrigation** – This procedure is no longer performed by most GP practices. Although the risks are low and nurses are specially trained to perform this, there is still a small chance (thought to be around 1 in 1000) of complications occurring - such as a perforated ear drum, outer or middle ear infection, or causing ringing in the ear (tinnitus).

## Options for Self-Care

**NB. If you suspect or are known to have a perforated ear drum or any other ear problem, do not put drops in your ears, except after medical advice.**

### **Step 1 - Olive Oil drops – purchased over the counter at your community pharmacy**

The following needs to be done at least once, preferably twice daily for up to 14 days.

- Lie on your side with the affected ear uppermost
- Pull the outer ear gently backwards and upwards to straighten the ear canal
- Put 2-3 drops of olive oil at room temperature, or warmed to no more than body temperature, into the affected ear(s) and gently massage just in front of the ear
- Stay laying on your side to allow the oil to soak in for around 10 mins
- After sitting up, wipe away any excess oil but try not to plug your ear with cotton wool.

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 naturally, without further intervention.

### **Step 2 – Sodium Bicarbonate drops – also purchased over the counter at your community pharmacy**

If the ear wax has not cleared up, follow the same procedure as above twice daily for 3 – 4 days using Sodium Bicarbonate drops, which can be obtained from your local pharmacy. It is water based and a little stronger than olive oil. Hydrogen peroxide formulations are also available, these cause middle ear damage if the ear drum is not intact so it is even more important to only use if advised to by a medical professional.

### **Step 3 – Bulb syringe – available over the counter at most community pharmacies.**

If your ear is still not clear, you may then want to try this at home. It cleanses the ear canal of any remaining ear wax or drops by using the bulb syringe as follows:

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

Your community pharmacist should be able to advise you further on safe use.

## **Recurrent blockage due to ear wax;**

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.