

# Earwax

Audiologists are frequently asked about earwax. What is it? Why do I have so much? How can I get rid of it?

## What is earwax, and why is it important?

Earwax, also known as *cerumen* (pronounced sə-ROOM-en), protects and lubricates the ear canal. It helps prevent foreign objects, such as dust, dirt, or even a bug, from reaching the eardrum. Earwax can help prevent infection in the ear canals and keeps the skin in the ear canals moist, so they don't become dry and itchy.

## What factors affect earwax production?

Earwax can range in color from pale yellow to black and may be dry or wet. Earwax usually becomes darker and harder with time. Our ears are supposed to be self-cleaning—meaning, for many people, we need to clean only the external part of the ear. If your ear canal is narrow or curvy, or if your ears create an excessive amount of earwax, then the earwax may get trapped in your ear. If that happens, a professional may need to remove it. Too much earwax, also known as *cerumen impaction*, can be caused by

- the use of cotton swabs;
- the use of hearing aids or other in-ear hearing devices (i.e., earbuds or insert earphones);
- the aging process; and/or
- the absence of fatty acids.

## Is having too much earwax a problem?

Earwax buildup can block sound coming into the ear. Too much earwax may cause difficulty hearing, dizziness, a feeling of fullness or pressure, and/or ringing in your ears (known as *tinnitus*). Your audiologist may need to remove excess earwax.

## Who do I see for earwax removal?

An *audiologist* is a professional who is trained in the prevention, evaluation, and treatment of hearing and balance disorders. Audiologists also perform earwax removal. Ask your audiologist if they perform earwax removal. If not, primary care physicians, otolaryngologists (ear, nose, and throat doctors), or physician assistants may remove earwax.

Look for an audiologist who has

- an AuD, PhD, or master's degree;
- the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Audiology (CCC-A) from ASHA; and
- a valid license in your state.

## What will happen at my earwax removal appointment?

If you suspect that you have a buildup of earwax, the audiologist will begin by looking into your ears with a device called an *otoscope*. Earwax removal can be done several different ways. Your audiologist will choose a method or type of instrumentation based on the amount and texture of your earwax. Here are three ways that cerumen can be removed:

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- Instruments—a *curette*, which is a tool shaped like a scoop, or forceps can be used to remove earwax from the ear canal.
- Suction—a medical tool can be used to gently suck earwax out of the ear canal.
- Irrigation—during this process, the ear is flushed with water, or with a combination of water and hydrogen peroxide, to assist in earwax removal.

## Can I remove earwax at home?

Audiologists and other medical professionals strongly discourage home earwax removal tools such as cures, picks, and ear candles. Incorrect usage of these tools can lead to damage of the ear canal, burns on the skin, and/or punctured eardrums.

Here are some safe ways to keep your ears clean or soften your earwax to help it come out on its own:

- When bathing or showering, use a damp washcloth and wash the outer parts of your ear. Do not put anything small, such as a cotton swab, into your ear canal.
- Hydrogen peroxide (alone or mixed with warm water) and/or other earwax softening drops, available over the counter, can help with earwax buildup between appointments with your health care provider. Use of either hydrogen peroxide or cerumen-softening agents is not recommended for everybody, especially if you have a history of ear surgery.

- Always consult with your audiologist or medical professional before putting any liquids in your ear. Your audiologist may assist in helping develop an individualized earwax management plan.

## Should I use cotton swabs?

No. When small items are pushed into your ear canal, they can move the earwax deeper and cause it to form a plug. Even if you see some earwax on a used cotton swab, you may still have earwax in the ear.

Content contributed by ASHA members Lindsay Creed, AuD, CCC-A, and Bria Collins, AuD, CCC-A.

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For more information and to view the entire Audiology Information Series library, visit [www.asha.org/aud/pei/](http://www.asha.org/aud/pei/).

For more information about balance problems, preventing falls, hearing loss, hearing aids, or referral to an ASHA-certified audiologist, contact:



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