

Healthy ears contain wax, which is produced by a special lining in the ear canal. Wax protects the tissues, and helps prevent infection by trapping micro-organisms, dirt and other irritants.

Wax is constantly travelling towards the outer ear where it can drop out. This process may take a couple of months to complete. The normal amount of wax produced can vary from person to person. Sometimes wax builds up in the ear and requires treatment.

Symptoms of wax build-up

The symptoms of wax build-up within the ear can include:

- mild deafness
- earache
- a sensation of fullness inside the ear
- tinnitus (ringing in the ear)
- dizziness.

In most cases, blockage of the ear canal with wax is a harmless event.

Treatment

Treatment may include drops to soften the ear wax and help it to fall out on its own (this may take a few days to a few weeks). Wax softening products are available from your local chemist. If this is not effective consult your GP. The following treatment options are available:

- Using an ear syringe to squirt warm water into the ear canal and float out the wax plug.
- Removing the wax using a suction device.
- Removing the wax with forceps or a special hook.
- Large quantities of hardened wax may need to be treated by an ear specialist.

Minimising ear wax build-up

There are ways to reduce ear wax build-up, including:

- Avoiding cleaning the ear canals with cotton buds, hair clips or fingertips, as any object poked into the ear can compact the wax and cause damage to the ear canal.
- Using wax-softening drops or olive oil twice a week, or according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- Limiting ear cleaning to the outer ear only.
- Treating any associated inflammatory skin conditions.

For further assistance

If you have any further problems with ear wax build-up please see your GP.

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