

Understanding Ear Wax (Cerumen) and Ear Cleanings

What Is Ear Wax (Cerumen)?

Ear wax, also called cerumen, is a natural and normal product in our outer ear. It is made by the glands of the ear canal skin. All people make cerumen, and it is often a yellow or brownish color. Cerumen is healthy for the ear because it helps keep the ear clean and keep infection away.

Can Cerumen Cause Ear Problems?

Although cerumen is a normal part of the ear, it can cause problems for some people. If there is excess cerumen, it can block the ear canal. This is called cerumen impaction. Impaction is more common in people who have narrow ear canals or wear hearing aids. Use of cotton swabs in the ears can also create cerumen impaction. Symptoms of impaction typically include the feeling of blockage within the ear or itching. Occasionally people will note a small decrease in their hearing. It rarely causes pain, drainage, or significant hearing loss, and if these symptoms are present, consideration should be given to another cause of the symptoms. Sometimes infection and other causes of hearing loss may be mistaken for cerumen.

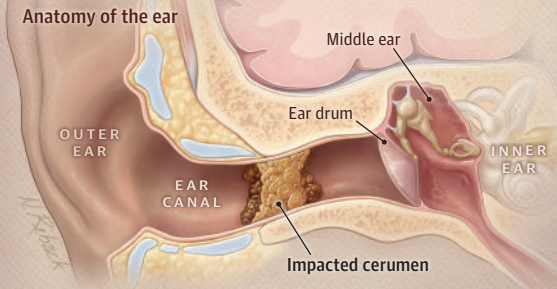
What Can I Do if Cerumen Blocks My Ear?

If you do experience a cerumen impaction, there are various ways to fix the problem. Over-the-counter (OTC) ear drops, such as carbamide peroxide, are often available and can help soften the cerumen and relieve some of the obstruction. Irrigation of the ears by a trained clinician is also an option, but should be avoided if there are concerns about infection, a hole in the eardrum, or problems other than cerumen. Irrigation and OTC drops are generally considered to have similar effectiveness in relief of the impaction. If you seek care from an otolaryngologist, various small instruments can be used to remove the cerumen impaction.

Is There Anything I Can Do to Prevent Cerumen Buildup?

Not everyone forms cerumen impactions or needs routine care for their ear wax. Some people build up cerumen more quickly than others and may need more frequent removals. It is generally recommended to avoid use of cotton swabs and other at-home tools to take out cerumen. This may lead to unnecessary damage to the ear. It is best to discuss with your physician whether routine follow-up and/or attempts to prevent cerumen buildup is recommended for cerumen impaction.

Cerumen (ear wax) is produced by glands in the ear canal skin and protects against infection. Cerumen impaction occurs when there is excess cerumen in the ear canal. Symptoms include a sensation of blockage in the ear, itching of the ear canal, or a slight decrease in hearing.



Safe removal of cerumen

At home

Ear drops (carbamide peroxide) can be used to help soften and loosen impacted cerumen.

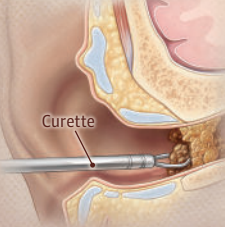


Avoid using household items because they can easily damage the ear canal or ear drum.



By your physician

A looped instrument (curette) may be used to scoop out excess cerumen.



Irrigation may be performed by using a syringe filled with warm water to flush out the ear canal.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Clinical Practice Guideline: Earwax (Cerumen Impaction)

<https://www.entnet.org/quality-practice/quality-products/clinical-practice-guidelines/cerumen-impaction/>

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