

# Ear wax information sheet

## Normal ear wax

Everyone has ear wax. It helps trap things like dirt and dust and protects the lining of the ear. It also protects the ear from infection. Ear wax is continuously produced and moves towards the entrance of the ear by a self-cleaning mechanism of the skin and when facial muscles are used to chew food and talk.

The colour, consistency and amount of ear wax can vary from person to person. Wax may appear to be dry and flaky, or have a crumbly consistency, honey coloured or dark brown. It may be very hard if it attaches to the underlying skin.

**For most people ear wax will not cause any problems and should be left alone without any attempts to remove it. Some people, however, may experience problems with ear wax and treatment may be required.**

## Common problems

### Age

Older people may have drier wax, and older men often develop more hairy ears.

### Cleaning attempts

You should never put objects such as cotton buds and hair clips into your ears to try to clean them. This can damage your ear canal and force wax down the canal and form a hard dry plug against the eardrum.

### Dusty or dirty environment

People who work in places where there is a lot of dust or dirt in the air sometimes find that this combines with the wax in the ear to form a plug.

### Earplugs

The use of earplugs, often mandatory in some occupations, can have a similar effect to cotton buds.

### Habit

Some people regularly have their ears irrigated because they think it is necessary and can prevent hearing loss. However, this is not the case. Ear wax is an important part of ear health and should only be removed if it has blocked the ear canal and is causing symptoms.

### Hearing aid moulds

These can interfere with the natural ability to shed dead skin and wax, and cause debris to build up in the canal.

## Reducing build-up of wax

If you have trouble with ear wax build up, you should try to keep your ears dry when swimming, bathing, and showering. This is important when washing hair as the detergents in soap, shampoos, and conditioners can irritate the ear and increase the amount of wax produced. To keep your ears dry, you can use silicone swim plugs (available from pharmacies). Or you can use a ball of cotton wool with a thin layer of petroleum jelly applied to it that is then positioned with the lubricated side against the ear canal entrance. The cotton wool should be placed in the outer bowl of the ear and not pushed into the canal.

## Treatment

### Ear wax softeners

If ear wax has built up and needs to be removed, this should be done using an ear wax softener. You can buy these from most pharmacies, and also get treatment advice.

The recommended dosage is 2 sprays per affected ear, twice a day for 3 weeks. The spray mists a coating of olive oil over the wax which softens it and enables it to come out naturally. You need to allow some time for this process to happen.

Olive oil drops are a suitable alternative. Patient experience indicates that the sprays are easier and less messy to use but drops work just as well. 3 drops should be put into the affected ear(s) twice a day for 3 weeks.

**If you have any concerns about the use of ear wax softeners and dissolvers, please ask your local pharmacy or GP practice for advice and support.**

### Side effects of ear softeners

It can take time for softeners to work. You may even feel that your ear is worse in the first few days of treatment. If the ear feels more blocked or your hearing is reduced, this is because the ear wax softener has expanded the ear wax before it can break it down. Some wax softeners may cause a temporary fluctuation in hearing, and mild discomfort or irritation.

Wax softener may also affect hearing aids, and people are advised not to wear them for at least 2 hours after the softener has been applied.

## What if wax softeners have not worked?

Most people's symptoms will resolve within 3 weeks with the use of wax softeners, but if the blockage persists sodium bicarbonate drops can be used to dissolve the ear wax. 3 drops should be applied to the affected ear 3 times a day for 1 week.

Sodium bicarbonate is not recommended if you have had a previous perforation to your eardrum. If this is the case, you should continue to use the olive oil spray or drops for 1 more week.

If after using the sodium bicarbonate drops you still have issues, wax can be removed using irrigation, micro-suction or a special probe.

The NHS in Cornwall and Isles of Scilly does not contract for ear wax removal services at this time. Some GP practices perform ear wax removal services, but most do not have the staff and equipment to do so.

If there is other ear disease, you may be referred to the local hospital for specialist care. However, this is not an ear wax removal service and there is strict access criteria that must be met. Your GP will be able to advise if you meet the referral criteria, which can be found on the Referral Management Service website: [rms.cornwall.nhs.uk](https://rms.cornwall.nhs.uk)

There are a number of local private providers who offer ear wax removal to people who would like to use this service.

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Room 210, Cornwall Council offices,  
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Information correct as of 26 July 2022



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