

EARWAX AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

The Outer Ear And Canal

The outer ear is the funnel-like part of the ear you can see on the side of the head, plus the ear canal (the hole which leads down to the eardrum).

The ear canal is shaped somewhat like an hourglass--narrowing part way down. The skin of the outer part of the canal has special glands that produce earwax. This wax is supposed to trap dust and sand particles to keep them from reaching the eardrum. Usually the wax accumulates a bit, and then dries up and comes tumbling out of the ear, carrying sand and dust with it. Or it may slowly migrate to the outside where it is wiped off.

Should You Clean Your Ears?

Wax is not formed in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum, but only in the outer part of the canal. So when a patient has wax blocked up against the eardrum, it is often because he has been probing his ear with such things as cotton-tipped applicators, bobby pins or twisted napkin corners. Such objects only serve as ramrods to push the wax in deeper. Also, the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum is very thin and fragile and is easily injured.

Earwax is healthy in normal amounts and serves to coat the skin of the ear canal where it acts as a temporary water repellent. The absence of earwax may result in dry, itchy ears.

Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning, that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of ear canal skin from the ear drum to the ear opening. Old earwax is constantly being transported from the ear canal to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

Under ideal circumstances, you should never have to clean your ear canals. However, we all know that this isn't always so.

When wax has accumulated so much that it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), your physician may have to wash it out, vacuum it, or remove it with special instruments. Or he may prescribe ear drops which are designed to soften the wax. If so, you may first wish to try over-the-counter products such as Debrox, or Murine Ear Ear Drops. These are not as strong as the prescription wax softeners but are effective for many patients. In the event that the nonprescription product is not satisfactory, a physician should be consulted.

You must know that you do not have a hole (perforation or puncture) in your eardrum. Putting the above eardrop products in your ear in the presence of an eardrum perforation may cause an infection. Certainly, washing water through such a hole would surely start up an infection. If you are uncertain whether you have a hole in your eardrum, consult your physician

You may soften the wax for a few days by instilling several drops of an earwax softener into the ear canal twice a day. This can be purchased in your drugstore without a prescription. If your ear still feels blocked after using the ear drops, you should consult your physician, who may elect to wash it out.

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