

Removal of Foreign Body from Ear

WHAT IS REMOVAL OF FOREIGN BODY FROM THE EAR?

This is a procedure to remove any one of a host of foreign bodies -- candy, beans, buttons, beads, peanuts -- which may become lodged in the external ear canal, especially in children. After inspecting the canal with a viewing instrument called an otoscope, the physician may be able simply to withdraw the unwanted material with forceps; or it may be necessary to flush it out by syringing the ear. Either of these two procedures can be performed in the doctor's office, without anesthetic. Rarely, a foreign object may have to be removed in the operating room, under general anesthetic.

WHY IS IT PERFORMED?

The presence of a foreign body in the ear canal is likely to cause inflammation and infection that could spread to the delicate structures of the middle and inner ear. A blockage of the canal may be signaled by any one of a range of symptoms, including earache, hearing loss, cough, giddiness, and inflammation. Urgent steps must be taken to remove the blockage and relieve these symptoms.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

In addition to relieving the symptoms of blockage, removal of foreign body is important in preventing serious ear disease. There is virtually no risk to the procedure.

THE PROCEDURE

The doctor begins by examining the affected ear with an otoscope, with the patient sitting upright or lying down, depending on age and the need or otherwise for restraint. Often, it is possible to grasp the foreign object with forceps and gently withdraw it. Or, if syringing is necessary a waterproof drape is placed around the neck and shoulders and a small receptacle is placed beneath the affected ear. An assistant meanwhile fills a syringe with warm water or saline solution. The outer ear is drawn back, and the syringe is introduced gently into the canal. As the plunger is depressed, the warm fluid flows the canal, and then trickles back into the receptacle. This should be sufficient to flush the offending object clear. If not, a small hook may be used to dislodge it. The ear is dried thoroughly with a tissue or cotton applicator. Finally, the physician re-examines the ear canal with the otoscope to ensure that it is now clear.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

There should be no problems following this procedure. However, if the patient feels any pain or dizziness during the procedure the syringe is withdrawn. Very rarely, it may be necessary to refer the patient to an otolaryngologist.

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