

# Earwax

## What is earwax?

Earwax is made by glands in the outer part of the ear canal. Earwax helps your ear stay healthy. It helps keep dust, dirt, and other substances from getting into the ear canal. Earwax also helps protect the ears from infection.

Earwax may be soft or hard and can vary in color from yellow to brown or black. It may also be dry, white, and flaky.

It is healthy to have earwax inside the ear canal. It is not a sign of poor hygiene. Usually, the ears constantly clean themselves by slowly moving earwax and debris out of the ear canal opening. Most of the time, we are unaware of this cleaning process.

## What are the symptoms of too much earwax?

Too much earwax in the ear canal may act like an earplug, blocking sound entering the ear and making it harder to hear. It may also cause itching. If your ear is painful, you may also have an outer ear infection.

## What causes earwax buildup?

No one knows for sure why some people have problems with too much earwax and others don't. Older adults tend to have more problems with earwax than younger adults. You may have more problems if you have coarse wiry hairs in the ears.

Your ear can get blocked with earwax if you use objects to clean the ear canal. An object may push earwax deeper into the ear canal and compact it. Then the earwax is too deep for the ear to clean itself.

Hearing aid users must watch for a buildup of earwax because the ear mold of a hearing aid acts like a dam, preventing the wax from moving out of the ear canal.

## How is earwax buildup treated?

There are safe ways to remove earwax if it is causing a loss of hearing. You can use baby oil, mineral oil, or special ear drops to soften the earwax. This may be enough to get extra wax to move slowly out of the ear. The wax will fall out or may be cleaned safely from the outer ear with a washcloth.

Don't try to soften the wax in your ear if you have ear pain or cold symptoms, or if your eardrum has ever had a hole or tear. If you have pain, you should see your healthcare provider.

Earwax that is causing problems can be removed by your healthcare provider. Your provider may use ear washes, a tiny spoon-shaped tool, or suction.

Your healthcare provider may refer you to an ear-nose-throat specialist for earwax removal if you have:

- Frequent blockages by earwax

- Chronic ear disease
- An eardrum with a tear or hole in it
- Only one ear with good hearing and that ear is the one with the earwax buildup.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

Unless there is a blockage, it is best to leave earwax alone. Remember, you need earwax to protect the ear. Having earwax does not mean that your ears are not clean.

Never try to remove earwax yourself with objects such as a cotton-tipped swab, pencil, car key, bobby pin, toothpick, matchstick, or high-pressure water spray. These are unsafe tools for removing earwax. They often push the earwax further down the ear canal toward the eardrum. They can hurt the ear canal or make a hole in the eardrum. They may damage the small bones in the middle ear behind the eardrum. They can even damage the inner ear, causing permanent hearing loss.

See your healthcare provider if you have pain or discomfort in 1 or both ears or if you notice a change in your hearing.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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# How to Use Ear Medicine



**Adults and children over 3**

1. Lie on your side with the ear that needs the medicine up.
2. For adults and children older than 3, hold the top part of the ear up and back as you put in the number of drops prescribed. For children 3 or younger, hold the earlobe down and back as you put in the number of drops prescribed. Do not touch the tip of the dropper to the ear or any other surface.
3. Keep lying down for a minute or two, or put a clean cotton plug in the ear to keep the medicine from running out when you get up.

Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist if you should wear gloves when you give ear medicine.

**Children 3 years old and younger**



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