

Self-Care - Earwax

Taking care of your “SELF” – Supporting Everyone to Live Freely

This is a self-care guide designed for those working in care homes, residential homes and assisted living.

The information provided in this guide does not replace person centred clinical advice.

The following information should be used as a guide when advising or purchasing self-care treatments for people residing in a care home, residential home or assisted living. Self-care medication and medical products are not always the most appropriate choice for treating minor ailments. Sometimes starting with a lifestyle change or trying natural remedies can be more effective.

Should you have any concern, at any time around self-care items being purchased on behalf of the resident or being brought in by relatives for the residents use, please discuss with your community pharmacist or GP practice.



What is Earwax?

- Earwax is an oily substance produced by glands at the entrance to the ear canal
- Healthy ears produce wax in order to protect and lubricate the skin inside the ear and it does not normally need to be removed, it normally just falls out on its own.

Causes of Earwax:

You might have earwax build-up because:

- You just have more wax in your ears, some people do naturally
- You have hairy or narrow canals (the tubes that link the eardrum and outer ear)
- Wax gets harder and more difficult to remove from hearing aids, earplugs and other things you put in your ear – these can push the wax further in.

How to tell if the resident has ears blocked with earwax:

- The resident complains of earache
- The resident complains of difficulty hearing
- The resident complains of itchiness in the ear
- The resident complains of dizziness
- You notice the resident has an ear infection
- The resident complains that sounds such as high-pitched tones are coming from inside the ear ([tinnitus](#)).

Excessive wax may need removing if it has caused:

- Dulled hearing
- Itchiness and discomfort
- Problems with hearing aid use.

Wax may also need to be removed to allow proper examination of the ear canal and eardrum.

**Speak to a pharmacist about earwax build-up
They can give advice and suggest treatments**

The pharmacist may recommend:

- Oil drops to soften the ear wax
- Chemical drops to dissolve the earwax.

How to treat earwax build-up:

- Don't use fingers or any objects like cotton buds to remove earwax, this will push it in and make it worse
- Over a period of two weeks, put 2 to 3 drops of olive or almond oil in the affected ear twice a day for a few days
- The earwax should fall out, especially when lying down to sleep
- There is no evidence that ear candles or ear vacuums get rid of earwax
- The earwax should fall out on its own or dissolve after about a week
- Don't use drops if you have a hole in your eardrum (a perforated eardrum).



Preventing earwax build-up

- You can't prevent earwax, it is there to protect your ears from dirt and germs
- You can keep assisting residents when using ear drops to soften the wax
- Keep earwax soft by inserting a few drops of olive oil or almond oil. This can be applied into the ear once or twice a week. Massage the ear gently to help it soak into any dried wax
- This will help it fall out on its own and should prevent blocked ears.

Using olive oil drops:

- 1) Assist the resident or help them lie down on their side with the ear that you want to put the drops in facing upwards
- 2) Gently pull the outer ear backwards and upwards to open and straighten the ear canal
- 3) Drop 2 or 3 drops of room temperature olive oil in to the ear and then massage the skin just in front of the entrance to the ear canal. This helps the oil run down the ear canal and get to the wax
- 4) Stay lying down for 5-10 minutes to allow the oil to soak in and have a tissue handy to wipe away any oil that trickles out of your ear when you lift your head
- 5) **DO NOT** put cotton wool in your ear afterwards as this will soak up the oil and prevent it from softening the wax effectively. It is a good idea to put an old towel on your pillow to prevent staining
- 6) Repeat for the other ear if required.

Will hearing aids be affected by excessive earwax?

- Hearing aids will be less effective if the ear canal is blocked
- You may find the ear mould of a behind-the-ear hearing aid may be discoloured or blocked by earwax, which could result in the hearing aid “whistling” whilst it works
- Hearing aids that are placed directly into the ear canal tend to have wax filters to prevent the inner workings of the aid from being damaged. These users may need to change the filter more frequently until the wax has been removed from the ear
- If putting oil into the ear, it is best not to put your hearing aid back in straight away because the oil may get into the workings of the hearing aid and cause damage
- Receiver-in-the-canal aids can push the wax further inside the canal so care should be taken, these too have filters that may need changing more frequently.

Once the earwax is removed, these symptoms usually improve. If they don't, you can book an appointment to see the nurse at your GP practice

See a nurse at your GP practice if:

- The ear hasn't cleared after 5 days
- The ear is badly blocked and the resident complains they can't hear anything (this could lead to an infection if it isn't cleared)
- **You are concerned about the resident and their condition**

Be aware that:

- Not all GP practices remove earwax

Some can:

- Flush the wax out with water (ear irrigation)
- Suck the wax out (micro suction)

These treatments are usually painless. You might have to pay to have them done privately.

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References:

BNF Online – available at <https://www.new.medicinescomplete.com>

Medicines Complete - https://www.medicinescomplete.com/mc/bnf/current/PHP78609-ear.htm?q=otitis&t=search&ss=text&tot=29&p=2#_hit

NHS Choices - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/earwax-build-up/>
<https://www.walsallhealthcare.nhs.uk/de-waxing-instructions-1.aspx>
<http://www.ageukhearingaids.co.uk/hearing-aid-news/tips-dealing-excessive-earwax-problems/>