

Earwax

What is earwax?

Earwax is normal. It protects the inner ear from water and infection. Sometimes, however, the wax builds up and leads to a blockage (impaction).

In some cases, the wax build-up falls out by itself without any treatment. At other times, the build-up needs treatment.

What causes an earwax build-up?

The outer ear canal is a 3cm-long tunnel that runs from the ear hole to the eardrum. It is lined with skin, hairs and small glands that produce wax.

The wax protects the skin of the ear canal and gives it a waterproof coating. The ear canal has a self-cleaning action that allows the natural removal of the wax.

The earwax you see is a combination of wax, shed skin cells and dirt.

A build-up of earwax can occur at any age. You are more likely to have a wax blockage if you:

- Produce a lot of wax
- Have narrow ear canals
- Have hairy ear canals
- Clean your ears with fingertips and cotton buds, which can push wax further down the canal
- Work in a dusty environment
- Have a skin condition such as eczema or psoriasis

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of wax build-up in the ear canal include:

- Mild deafness
- Earache
- A sensation of fullness in the ear or itchiness
- Ringing in the ear (tinnitus)

Some experts believe that earwax may also be associated with 'vertigo' (the sensation that you're moving even when standing still). However, this link is not certain.

Earwax rarely causes ear discharge or pain. In fact you may not be aware that your ear is full of wax until you find it harder to hear or there is a waxy discharge. If an infection develops in the skin under the wax, your ear may feel itchy and sore.

Treatment

- You may need to use wax-softening drops such as Waxsol® or Cerumol® for a few days. Olive oil can also be used. These oils soften the earwax and help it fall out on its own.
- Sometimes a doctor may need to remove excess wax by irrigating the ear with pressurised water. This is not an emergency procedure and is best performed by your local doctor.
- Large amounts of hard wax may need to be treated by an ear specialist. Your doctor can organise a referral for you.

What to expect

In most cases, earwax causes only mild discomfort. It is easily treated and should not cause any long-term damage. Some people will have ongoing problems with earwax.

Do not try to treat earwax yourself. You might cause an infection in the ear canal or damage your eardrum.

Prevention

It is not possible to reduce the amount of wax you produce but there are ways to stop it building up:

- Avoid cleaning the ear canals with your fingertips, cotton buds and other objects
- Limit ear cleaning to the outer ear only

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

PATIENT INFORMATION

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Seek medical review at the Cabrini ED if you develop:

- Any hearing loss
- Dizziness
- Earache
- Pus or blood coming from the ear

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au