



Finn R. Amble, MD, FACS, SC  
Eastland Medical Plaza I  
1505 Eastland Drive, Suite 220  
Bloomington, IL 61701  
Phone: 309-585-0370 • Fax: 309-663-2956

## EAR WAX

### What is ear wax impaction?

Ear wax impaction is when ear wax builds up enough to cause symptoms. Normally, ear wax helps to protect the insides of the ears and prevents injury or infection. But having too much earwax can cause symptoms such as pain and trouble hearing. The medical term for ear wax is "cerumen". Young children and older adults are more likely than others to have ear wax impaction.

### What causes ear wax impaction?

Several different things can cause ear wax impaction:

\**Diseases that affect the ear*-Some health problems can affect the shape of the inside of the ear and make it hard for wax to move out. For example, skin problems that cause skin cells to shed a lot can lead to wax build-up in ears.

\**A narrow ear canal*- In some people, the ear canals are narrower than others. These people might be more likely to have ear wax impaction. A person's ear canal can become more narrow after an ear injury or after severe or multiple ear infections.

\**Changes in ear wax and lining due to aging*-As people get older, their ear wax gets harder and thicker. This makes it difficult for the wax to move out of the ear as it should.

\**Bad ear-cleaning habits*-Some people try to clean their ears using cotton swabs (Q-Tips) or other tools. This can actually push the wax deeper into the ear instead of getting it out. Over time, this can cause ear wax impaction.

\**Making too much ear wax*-Some people make more ear wax than others. This can happen when water gets trapped in the ear, or when the ear is injured. But some people have a lot of ear wax for no obvious reason.

### What are the symptoms of ear wax impaction?

The symptoms include:

- \*Trouble hearing
- \*Pain in the ear
- \*Hearing a ringing noise in the ear
- \*Feeling like the ear is blocked or plugged

These symptoms can happen in one or both ears.

### Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. If you or your child has any of these symptoms, see a doctor or nurse. He or she can check the insides of the ears to figure out if the symptoms are caused by ear wax impaction or another problem, such as an ear infection.

### Should I clean my (or my child's) ears at home?

No. The insides of the ears do not usually need to be cleaned. Sticking things into the ears can push the wax in deeper and cause impaction.

### How is ear wax impaction treated?

There are several treatments to remove impacted ear wax. Doctors and nurses offer these treatments only to people who have bothersome symptoms. They do not recommend treatments for removing ear wax in people who have no symptoms, even if their ears are impacted.

In some cases, doctors and nurses will remove ear wax in people whose ears are impacted and who can't clearly explain their symptoms. This can include young children, older adults, and people who have trouble thinking clearly.

There are several different ways to remove ear wax:

\*Ear drops- Special ear drops can soften ear wax and help it to drain out. Ear drops are NOT usually safe for people with an ear infection or damage to the eardrum.

\*Rinsing- In some cases, a doctor or nurse can remove impacted ear wax by squirting water (or special liquid) into the ear to rinse it out.

\*Special tools- A doctor or nurse might use a special tool to remove ear wax. There are different types of tools that can do this safely. These include small sticks, hooks, and spoons. There are also tools that use suction to pull the wax out.

"Ear candling" is sometimes advertised as a way to remove ear wax. This involves lighting one end of a hollow candle and putting the other end in the ear. Ear candling has NOT been proven to work well and can even cause injuries and/or burns.

Information above obtained from UpToDate website.