

Earwax Problems

Earwax, also called cerumen, is a normal substance that helps protect the ear canal. If too much earwax builds up, it can block the ear canal, causing ear discomfort, reduced hearing, and other symptoms. Excessive earwax can usually be removed by using special drops. If necessary, it can be done by a doctor. Don't try to remove wax from your child's ear by inserting anything in the ear, including cotton swabs.

What kinds of problems are caused by earwax?

The build-up of too much earwax can block the your child's ear canal. This is sometimes called "impaction." Removing the excessive earwax promptly relieves symptoms such as feeling "clogged-up," reduced hearing, and discomfort or pain. Earwax can be removed by using eardrops available at the drugstore or, if necessary, in the doctor's office.

Other ways of trying to remove earwax can lead to problems. Putting cotton swabs (Q-Tips) or other objects in the ear can cause pain or bleeding or puncture holes in the eardrum or lead to an infection of the ear canal (otitis externa).

What do they look like?

If your child has earwax blocking the ear canal, you may notice that she or he has:

- Decreased hearing.
- A "clogged" feeling in the ear—discomfort; pain is uncommon. Young children may hold or pull on their ears.
- You may be able to see earwax inside the ear canal.

What causes problems with earwax?

Some people just produce more earwax than others. Although earwax blockage is a common problem for some people, others rarely or never have this problem.

Can earwax problems be prevented?

- If your child has a lot of earwax build-up, using special eardrops on a regular basis may help to prevent problems.
- Follow the doctor's instructions on removing earwax. Especially in babies, never insert cotton swabs or anything else in the ear to attempt to remove earwax.

How are earwax problems treated?

- Earwax removal kits are available at drugstores. Tilt your child's head sideways and then place drops in the ear. Let the drops remain in the ear for several minutes; they will help dissolve the wax. This procedure can be repeated for a few days, if needed. If excessive earwax is still present, call our office.
- In the doctor's office, earwax may be removed using special instruments, or using water to gently flush out the ear canal. Drops may first be placed in the ear to soften the wax, making it easier to remove.

Don't use an earwax removal kit if your child has a hole in the eardrum (rupture or perforation) or if your child has a possible ear infection (an earache, usually with a cold, sometimes with fever).

When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child has:

- Ear discomfort and reduced hearing that do not clear up after earwax is removed.
- Frequent problems with earwax.
- Severe ear pain, earache with a cold or fever, or fluid draining from the ear—this is usually *not* related to earwax.