

Looking after your ears – a self-help guide for adults

What is wax? Wax is normal and is produced by the ear to protect itself. Earwax should normally come out naturally. It only becomes a problem when there is too much wax. Too much wax can make you feel uncomfortable or deaf.

If any of the following occur, seek medical advice: -

- Pain
- Discharge or bleeding from the ear
- Sudden deafness or buzzing
- Foreign bodies in the ear
- Dizziness

Never push anything into your ears

Tips to help you look after your ears and prevent blockage

- Ears are normally self-cleaning. Earwax forms a protective coating of the skin of the ear canal. As people become older, the ceruminous glands in the ear tend to produce less sebum, making the earwax less moist. Dry wax does not come out of the ear canal as readily as normal wax.
- It may be possible to prevent wax build up or soften the wax away by using simple olive oil eardrops. Olive oil eardrops with a pipette can be bought from most chemists. As a preventive measure, use one or two drops in the ear, at room temperature, once a week, to prevent the build up of excessive wax.
- Try to keep your ears dry, for example when washing your hair.
- Never use cotton wool buds to clean your ears. This can cause damage to the delicate lining of the ear canal and may cause serious injury. It may also push any wax further in.
- Try to avoid lying in the bath to wash your hair.
- Do not ignore problems with your ears. Seek medical advice if you are worried.

Ear irrigation

Ear irrigation should only be used as a last resort as it is an invasive procedure that can carry risks. It may be possible for you to prevent wax build up by a regular maintenance of weekly olive oil (as described above). If wax has built up, 7-14 days of olive oil drops may avoid the need for ear irrigation, as it can encourage expulsion of wax on its own. Drops should be instilled two to three times a day for a minimum of two weeks. The wax is softened and it often breaks up after using the drops. Flakes or crusts usually fall out bit by bit.

Before ear irrigation can take place a nurse will need to have performed an assessment and examined your ears and recommended this procedure. The eardrops should be used as described above. This is essential as it helps to soften the wax and makes the whole procedure safer and more successful. Ear irrigation can be uncomfortable, but should not be painful. Lukewarm water is squirted into the ear canal and this dislodges the plug of wax. Some people feel dizzy and should sit down for a while after the procedure. Rarely, ear irrigation can cause serious damage to the eardrum. Ear irrigation may not be advised if you have certain ear problems, in particular: -

- Previous ear surgery
- Previous recurrent ear infections

- Perforated ear drum
- You are deaf in your other ear (as there is a small risk that ear irrigation can cause deafness in your good ear and so make you feel deaf in both ears)

You will be asked for written consent prior to ear syringing.

Please note that ear irrigation carries a risk of perforation of the eardrum, deafness, trauma to the ear and the procedure can lead to an ear infection. In some patients, tinnitus (ringing in the ears) can be aggravated or caused for no obvious reason (Palm Training Ltd. 2006). Occasionally, ear irrigation can make a person feel faint or dizzy.

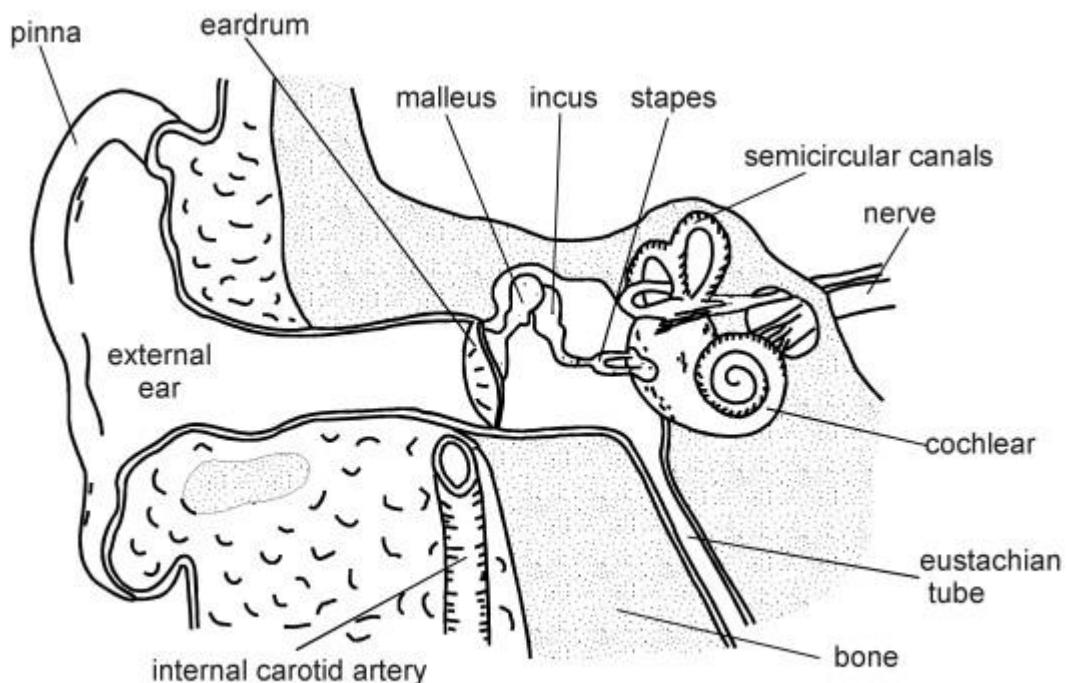
Please make an appointment to have your ears assessed by the nurse at the surgery. You will need to see a doctor prior to ear irrigation, if you are acutely unwell or have had any of the problems stated above.

Community nurses only visit housebound patients to carry out this procedure.

How to apply drops

The olive oil should be at room temperature.

- 1 Lie on your side with the affected ear uppermost.
- 2 Pull the top of the pinna (outer ear) gently backwards and upwards, to straighten the ear canal (see diagram).
- 3 Drop 2 or 3 drops of oil into the ear canal and massage just in front of the ear, gently.
- 4 Remain lying down for 5 – 10 minutes with the affected ear uppermost and then wipe away the excess oil.
Do not put cotton wool in the ear, as this will absorb the oil.
- 5 Repeat the procedure to the opposite ear if necessary.



CROSS SECTION OF THE EAR