

# What is earwax?

**Earwax is a waxy material produced by glands inside the ear. It helps to keep the ears healthy and clean; it stops the skin that lines our ear canal from drying and cracking and protects the ear by trapping dirt and repelling water so it helps to prevent infections.**

Most of the time our ear canals clean themselves; as we talk, chew and move our jaws the earwax and skin cells slowly move from the eardrum to the ear opening where it usually dries, and falls out. Earwax doesn't usually cause problems, but if too much earwax is produced it can cause a blockage which can be painful or could cause hearing loss.

The most common symptoms caused by blocked earwax are:

- **Conductive hearing loss:** which is when there is a problem conducting sound waves anywhere along the route through the outer ear, tympanic membrane (eardrum), or middle ear (ossicles)
- **Earache**
- **Tinnitus:** the patient may hear sounds e.g. ringing or buzzing in one or both ears, or in the head. They may come and go, or the patient might hear the noise all the time
- **Vertigo:** vertigo feels like the patient or everything around the patient is spinning – enough to affect balance. It's more than just feeling dizzy.

## Treatment:

Earwax should be removed if it is totally blocking the ear canal **AND** one of the following:

- The person is symptomatic (with conductive hearing loss, earache, tinnitus or vertigo)
- The tympanic membrane is obscured by wax but needs to be viewed to establish a diagnosis
- The person wears a hearing aid and an impression needs to be taken for a mould, or wax is causing the hearing-aid to whistle.

## Treatment continued...

Ear irrigation using an electronic device to remove earwax in adults, **CANNOT** be used if the person has had or got:

- An eardrum perforation
- An ear infection
- Previous ear surgery.

Microsuction (earwax removal is undertaken using a microscope and a medical suction device) or other methods of earwax removal (such as, manual removal using a probe) for adults in primary or community care only, might be used if:

- The practitioner (such as a community nurse or audiologist) has training and expertise in using these methods to remove earwax, **AND**
- The correct equipment is available.

## Patient eligibility criteria:

Ear irrigation as a management option for ear wax should be avoided whenever possible. However, it may be carried out in primary care by a specially qualified clinician (in patients over the age of six months), who have the level of understanding required to enable the procedure to be carried out safely if:

- Patient must have used ear drops for at least 3-5 days before irrigation is undertaken **AND** the patient must have at least **ONE** of the following symptoms which has persisted despite ear drops **AND IF** earwax is totally blocking the ear canal:
  - Hearing loss
  - Earache
  - Tinnitus
  - Vertigo
  - If the tympanic membrane is obscured by wax but needs to be viewed to establish a diagnosis
  - The person wears a hearing aid and an impression needs to be taken for a mould, or wax is causing the hearing aid to whistle.

This means (for patients who **DO NOT** meet the above criteria) the CCG will **ONLY** fund the treatment if an Individual Funding Request (IFR) application proves exceptional clinical need and that is supported by the CCG.

## Advice and further guidance:



For more information, search for 'earwax build up' at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)