



# Ear Wax Self-Care Guidelines

## Earwax

### Overview

Earwax is a natural substance that your body makes, which filters and traps debris to protect your ear canal from potential infection. It ranges in color from light to dark brown or orange.

A plug of earwax is not a serious problem, more a nuisance. You only need to remove earwax if it is causing symptoms, such as dulled hearing, ringing in the ears (tinnitus), or when fitting a hearing aid. Most earwax problems can be handled with home treatments.

### Important

Earwax won't cause a blockage unless it is pushed in, especially if you use cotton swabs, bobby pins, or other small devices and push wax deeply in the ear canal. **DO NOT** try to clean the ear canal with these items as it can further press the wax against the eardrum. It may even cause an ear infection.

## Causes of earwax impaction

Several factors can cause earwax impaction:

- Some health problems can affect the shape of the inside of the ear, and make it hard for wax to move out.
- A narrow ear canal – A person's ear canal can become narrower after an ear injury or after severe or multiple ear infections.
- As people get older, earwax consistency may be harder and thicker, making it more difficult to move out of the ear.
- Some people try to clean their ears with cotton swabs, narrow or sharp tools, which can push wax deeper into the ear, causing complete obstruction in some individuals.
- Some people produce earwax excess, especially when water gets trapped in the ear, or with ear injury.
- Ear devices, such as hearing aids, ear plugs, or ear bud style headphones may also cause earwax impaction if used for a prolonged period of time.

## Symptoms of earwax impaction

- Trouble hearing
- Pain or feeling of fullness in the ear
- Feeling like the ear is blocked or plugged
- Hearing a ringing noise in the ear (tinnitus)

- Dizziness
- Itchiness

These symptoms can happen in 1 or both ears.

### Important

- **DO NOT** try to remove earwax if you have ear pain, swelling, redness or a discharge that looks different than earwax.
- **DO NOT** try to remove earwax if you think you have a ruptured eardrum, if you have had ear surgery, or if you have tubes in your ears.
- **DO NOT** use dental irrigation devices, such as a Water Pik, as this can injure the ear canal and may rupture the eardrum.

## Self-Care

Most earwax issues can be handled with home treatment.

### Ear drops

- Place a few drops of warm mineral oil or olive oil in the ear twice a day.
- Lie with the affected ear uppermost for 10 minutes to allow the drops to soak in the ear.
- **Make sure the oil is warm, as cold fluid can cause pain and dizziness.**
- When the wax is loose/soft, a gentle, warm shower is usually all that's needed to remove it; let water flow into the ear then tip your head to let the earwax drain out.
- You will not necessarily see wax come out; it may come out unnoticed.

You can continue the oil treatment for any length of time, but 1 to 2 weeks is usually enough.

### When to call for help during self-care

**Call the clinic if any of the following occur during self-care at home:**

- New or worse bleeding or drainage.
- New symptoms, such as hearing loss or dizziness.
- Signs of infection, including chills or fever of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.
- Symptoms occur more often or are more severe.

### Ear irrigation

Ear irrigation is only recommended in rare occasions where ear drops have failed to work. Ear syringing can lead to ear infections, a perforated ear drum or ringing in the ears (tinnitus) and therefore it is performed in exceptional circumstances. If you think you have persisting wax despite following all of the self-care instructions, please contact the nurse to discuss and determine if an appointment is required.

### Is there a fee for ear irrigation?

Yes, the fee is 25\$ per irrigation session.

Ear irrigation is not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Program (OHIP) unless medically required.

### Who do I contact if I have more questions?

If you have any concerns, contact the clinic at 613-446-7677 to speak with a member of the nursing team. You can also consult your pharmacist.

If the clinic is closed and your concern is urgent, call Tele-Health at 811 or visit your nearest emergency department.

**This document does not replace a consultation with a health care professional.**

***“Participate more actively in the management of your own health”***