

Earwax:

Insight into the proper care of the ears

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Good intentions to keep ears clean may be risking the ability to hear. The ear is a delicate and intricate area, including the skin of the ear canal and the eardrum. Therefore, special care should be given to this part of the body. Start by discontinuing the use of cotton-tipped applicators and the habit of probing the ears.

Why does the body produce earwax?

Cerumen or earwax is healthy in normal amounts and serves as a self-cleaning agent with protective, lubricating, and antibacterial properties. The absence of earwax may result in dry, itchy ears. Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning; that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of earwax and skin cells from the eardrum to the ear opening. Old earwax is constantly being transported, assisted by chewing and jaw motion, from the ear canal to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

Earwax is not formed in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum, but in the outer one-third of the ear canal. So when a patient has wax blockage against the eardrum, it is often because he has been probing the ear with such things as cotton-tipped applicators, bobby pins, or twisted napkin corners. These objects only push the wax in deeper.

When should the ears be cleaned?

Under ideal circumstances, the ear canals should never have to be cleaned. However, that isn't always the case. The ears should be cleaned when enough earwax accumulates to cause symptoms or to prevent a needed assessment of the ear by Dr. Rheuark. This condition is called cerumen impaction, and may cause one or more of the following symptoms:

- Earache, fullness in the ear, or a sensation the ear is plugged
- Partial hearing loss, which may be progressive
- Tinnitus, ringing, or noises in the ear
- Itching, odor, or discharge
- Coughing
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What is the recommended method of ear cleaning?

To clean the ears, wash the external ear with a cloth, but do not insert anything into the ear canal.

Most cases of ear wax blockage respond to home treatments used to soften wax. Patients can try placing a few drops of mineral oil, baby oil, glycerin, or commercial drops in the ear. Detergent drops such as hydrogen peroxide or carbamide peroxide may also aid in the removal of wax.

Irrigation or ear syringing is commonly used for cleaning and can be performed by your primary care physician or at home using a commercially available irrigation kit. Common solutions used for syringing include water and saline, which should be warmed to body temperature to prevent dizziness. Ear syringing is most effective when water, saline, or wax dissolving drops are put in the ear canal 15 to 30 minutes before treatment. Caution is advised to avoid having your ears irrigated if you have diabetes, a perforated eardrum, tube in the eardrum, or a weakened immune system.

Manual removal of earwax is also effective. This is most often performed by Dr. Rheuark using suction, special miniature instruments, and a microscope to magnify the ear canal. Manual removal is preferred if your ear canal is narrow, the eardrum has a perforation or tube, other methods have failed, or if you have diabetes or a weakened immune system.

Why shouldn't cotton swabs be used to clean earwax?

Wax blockage is one of the most common causes of hearing loss. This is often caused by attempts to clean the ear with cotton swabs. Most cleaning attempts merely push the wax deeper into the ear canal, causing a blockage.

The outer ear is the funnel-like part of the ear that can be seen on the side of the head, plus the ear canal (the hole which leads down to the eardrum). The ear canal is shaped somewhat like an hourglass—narrowing part way down. The skin of the outer part of the canal has special glands that produce earwax. This wax is supposed to trap dust and dirt particles to keep them from reaching the eardrum. Usually the wax accumulates a bit, dries out, and then comes tumbling out of the ear, carrying dirt and dust with it. Or it may slowly migrate to the outside where it can be wiped off.

Are ear candles an option for removing wax build up?

No, ear candles are not a safe option of wax removal as they may result in serious injury. Since users are instructed to insert the 10" to 15"-long, cone-shaped, hollow candles, typically made of wax-impregnated cloth, into the ear canal and light the exposed end, some of the most common injuries are burns, obstruction of the ear canal with wax of the candle, or perforation of the membrane that separates the ear canal and the middle ear.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) became concerned about the safety issues with ear candles after receiving reports of patient injury caused by the ear candling procedure. There are no controlled studies or other scientific evidence that support the safety and effectiveness of these devices for any of the purported claims or intended uses as contained in the labeling.

Based on the growing concern associated with the manufacture, marketing, and use of ear candles, the FDA has undertaken several successful regulatory actions, including product seizures and injunctions, since 1996. These actions were based, in part, upon violations of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act that pose an imminent danger to health.

When should a Dr. Rheuark be consulted?

If the home treatments discussed in this leaflet are not satisfactory or if wax has accumulated so much that it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), Dr. Rheuark may prescribe eardrops designed to soften wax, or he may wash or vacuum it out. Occasionally, Dr. Rheuark may need to remove the wax using microscopic visualization.

If there is a possibility of a hole (perforation or puncture) in the eardrum, consult Dr. Rheuark prior to trying any over-the-counter remedies. Putting eardrops or other products in the ear with the presence of an eardrum perforation may cause pain or an infection. Certainly, washing water through such a hole could start an infection.

What can I do to prevent excessive earwax?

There are no proven ways to prevent cerumen impaction, but not inserting cotton-tipped swabs or other objects in the ear canal is strongly advised. If you are prone to repeated wax impaction or use hearing aids, consider seeing Dr. Rheuark every 6 to 12 months for a checkup and routine preventive cleaning.

Make an appointment with Dr. Rheuark at (310) 373-8777.