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Ear Wax: Is It Normal?

Ear wax (cerumen) is an oily material formed by normal glands in the outer ear canal. Wax is made of fat and dead skin cells and is produced to trap anything that may enter the ear canal. Under normal conditions, the wax accumulates, dries out and then falls out of the ear, carrying dirt and dust with it.

Some children produce more wax and because of variations in the shape of the ear canal, may be more prone to trapping wax. Earwax is healthy in normal amounts and serves to coat the skin of the ear canal where it acts as a temporary water repellent. The absence of earwax may result in dry, itchy ears.

An "impaction" is the accumulation of excessive ear wax. The use of Q-Tips, bobby pins, or needles interferes with the ear's self-cleaning mechanism. Attempts to remove wax in this way only pushes the wax further down the ear canal. In addition, damage can be done to the ear canal and or eardrum, causing bleeding or a hole in the eardrum. This trapped wax accumulates resulting in an impaction.

Wax impaction is one of the most common causes of hearing loss.

Should You Clean Your Child's Ears?

Important rule: "Never put anything smaller than your elbow in your child's ear!"

Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning; that is, there is a slow and orderly movement of ear canal skin from the eardrum to the ear opening. Old earwax is constantly being transported from the ear canal to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

Under ideal circumstances, you should never have to clean your child's ear canals. However, we all know that this isn't always so. If you want to clean your child's ears, you can wash the external ear with a cloth over a finger, but do not insert anything into the ear canal.

What Are The Symptoms Of Wax Buildup?

- hearing loss noticed by the parents
- ringing noises in the ear
- mild earache or ear pain
- fullness in the ear or a sensation the ear is plugged
- pulling at the ear in babies

HomeTreatment

Most cases of ear wax blockage respond to home treatments used to soften wax if there is no hole or myringotomy tubes in the eardrum. Patients can try placing a few drops of mineral oil, baby oil, glycerin, or commercial drops, such as Debrox, or Murine Ear Drops in the ear. Detergent drops such as hydrogen peroxide may also aid in the removal of wax. Parents should know that rinsing the ear canal with hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) results in oxygen bubbling off and water being left behind - wet, warm ear canals make good incubators for growth of bacteria. Flushing the ear canal with rubbing alcohol displaces the water and dries the canal skin. If alcohol causes severe pain, it suggests the presence of an eardrum perforation.

When Should My Child See The Doctor?

If you are uncertain whether you have a hole (perforation or puncture) in your eardrum, consult your physician prior to trying any over-the-counter remedies. Putting eardrops or other products in your ear in the presence of an eardrum perforation may cause an infection. Washing water through a hole in the eardrum could start an infection.

In the event that the home treatments discussed above are not satisfactory, or if wax has accumulated so much it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), your physician may prescribe eardrops designed to soften wax, clean out the wax using an ear curette (special ear cleaning instrument) or wash the wax out with water. None of these procedures are painful.

This information should not be used as substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician. Health related topics found on the Andorra Pediatrics web site should not be used for diagnosing purposes or be substituted for medical advice. As with any new or ongoing treatment, always consult your professional healthcare provider before making any changes in treatment or beginning any new treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please call our office.