

How Do I Get Wax Out of My Ears?

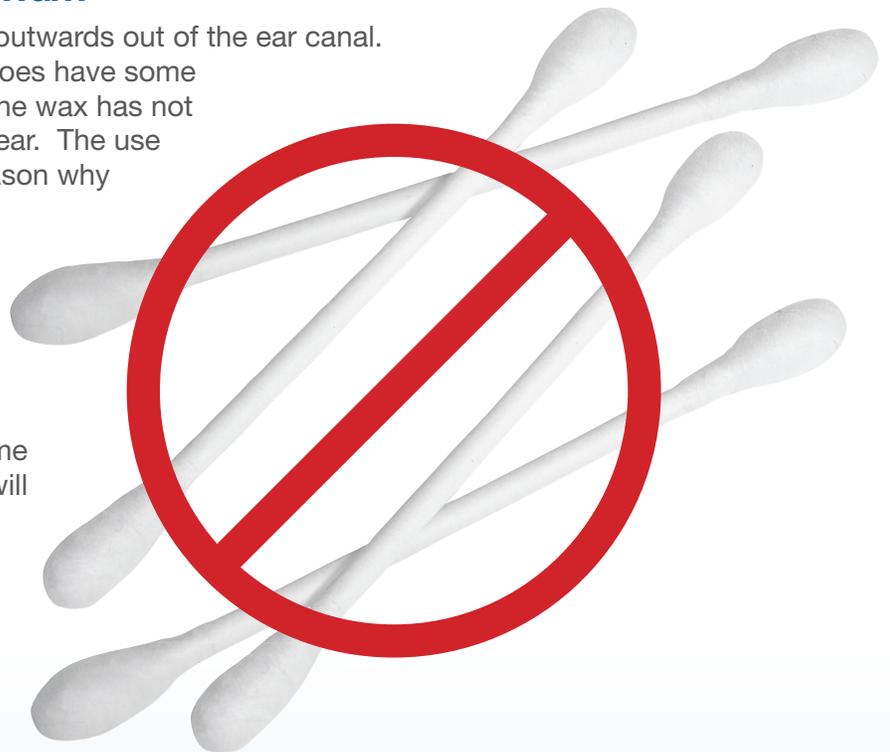
What is Ear Wax (Cerumen)?

Ear wax can be a very exciting topic! Ear wax, also called cerumen, is a naturally occurring substance that is made up of special sweat glands called “ceruminous glands” and “sebaceous” or oil glands, as well as dead skin cells, and other debris. Contrary to popular belief, cerumen is actually quite functional; it serves as a lubricant, water repellent, an anti-bacterial/anti-fungal agent, and an entrapper of dust and even insects. Its function is similar to eyes producing tears. Imagine your eyes if you didn't have tears.

Believe it or not – not all ear wax is created equal. Ear wax can be hard or soft; yellow or brown; flaky or runny. There are many types of ear wax and these are genetically conditioned. For example, Asian people and people from the North American First Nations have a dry flaky wax that has been referred to as “oatbran” wax. A physician would find this type of wax relatively easy to remove. In contrast to the Asian dry wax, Western Europeans and those of African descent generally have a softer, stickier type of wax.

Why Do I Accumulate Wax?

Ear wax will naturally migrate outwards out of the ear canal. However, this skin migration does have some barriers, and will only work if the wax has not been pushed deeply in to the ear. The use of hearing aids can be one reason why wax is pushed deeply into the ear. Another is the use of earplugs - either for listening to music, or to prevent loud noise from factories. There are some people that have very narrow ear canals; with these people ear wax can become stuck in the ear and will block the ear. Of course, we cannot forget the use of Q-tips (which inevitably do more damage than good) that push the wax further down the ear canal!



How Can I Keep My Ears Clean?

It is fine to remove any ear wax after a shower or bath from the outer part of the ear (the part that you see when you look at a person), but do NOT use Q-tips or any other object that probes the ear. Not only can you push the ear wax further in, but there is a risk of scratching the ear canal wall, or even damaging the eardrum.

Some people may be prone to building up ear wax, while others hardly get any at all. If you suspect an abnormal amount of wax, see your family doctor or ear doctor. They may recommend putting drops of olive oil or mineral oil in the ear canal a few days before it is removed. These types of oils will soften the wax, and make the removal process more enjoyable.

However, nothing should be put in the ear without a consultation with an appropriate health care individual. People with holes in their eardrums should be wary of putting any fluids in their ears unless instructed to by a physician.

Itchiness in the ears can be a sign of either too much or too little wax. Generally physicians will only remove enough ear wax in order to get a good look at the eardrum. Most physicians will leave some wax in the ear in order to let it do its protective work.