

EARWAX

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What a nuisance! This is often the culprit that sends folks to the ear doctor. Some 2,000 tiny, wax-producing "cerumen" glands in each ear canal produce it. It is the function of the cerumen glands to secrete a protective coat of wax. Normally, tiny invisible hairs keep slowly moving the wax and any dirt you may have collected toward the outside. Because it is sticky, the wax traps debris that enters the ears. As the wax is forced out of the canal, it takes the debris with it, thereby keeping the canal free of foreign material. Besides helping to keep the canal free of dust, the wax also serves as a protection against infection.

Usually ear wax doesn't present a problem, and people do not have to do anything special to clean their ears. Yet some people tend to produce too much of it or wax that is unusually hard and plugs the ear canal. This may result in hearing loss, the feeling of a plugged ear, or discomfort.

If you need to clean your ears, the safest way is to gently wash the canal with an ear syringe that can be purchased in a drugstore. First, you must be certain that you do not have a hole (perforation) in your eardrum; otherwise, you would get an infection from water entering your middle ear through the eardrum. If you are not certain that you do not have a hole in your eardrum, consult your physician, or an ear doctor (otolaryngologist). Also, do not attempt to wash your ear if it is infected (painful, tender, or draining).

Before washing the ear, you may want to try to soften the wax with the use of a wax softener. Debrox and Murine Ear Drops are two brands of ear drops that can be purchased without a prescription and help soften wax. A few drops can be placed in the ear canals twice daily for a few days. Then wash the ear with warm water, using the plain rubber bulb ear syringe. Direct a strong stream of water into the ear with one hand while you are leaning over a sink and are pulling the ear upward and backward with the other hand. Do not insert the tip of the syringe into the ear canal; to do so could block the canal and not allow the water to come out of the ear. Keep washing until the hearing is no longer blocked. You may have to wash up to 50 times! When you are finished washing, place a few drops of alcohol in the ear canal to help dry the canal and kill bacteria or fungus.

If the wax still will not come out, see your physician or an ear doctor. Remember,

- Don't wash your ear if it is infected.
- Don't wash your ear if it has a hole in the eardrum.
- Don't clean your ears with cotton-tipped applicators, bobby-pins, or any objects that fit inside the ear canals. To do so risks injury to the delicate skin of the ear canal, and even possible injury to the eardrum. Often people just succeed in forcing the wax in deeper toward the eardrum.
- Your grandmother's advice was good advice: "Never put anything smaller than your elbow in your ear!"