



Newcastle Gateshead
Clinical Commissioning Group

Blocked ears (wax)

Self-care guidelines for patients

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What is Ear wax?

Ear wax is a natural secretion which forms a protective coating on the skin in the ear canal. The quantity of ear wax produced varies greatly from person to person.

If you think you have a build-up of ear wax, do **NOT** try to clean the ear canal with cotton wool buds. This can make things worse, as you will push some ear wax deeper inside. It may also cause an ear infection.

A plug of ear wax is not a serious problem, more a nuisance.

You only need to remove ear wax if wax build-up is causing symptoms such as dulled hearing or problems with a hearing aid.

How to remove Ear wax

Ear wax usually falls out on its own. You only need to remove ear wax if wax build-up is causing symptoms such as dulled hearing or problems with a hearing aid.

Please do not attempt to self-treat if you have:

- Pain in the ear
- Known ear drum perforation or grommets
- Ear infection in the affected ear
- Pain, discharge or bleeding from the ear (*this may mean you have an ear infection*)
- If you have only one hearing ear which is the one affected
- Previous ear surgery in the affected ear
- Sudden onset of deafness or buzzing in the ear
- Dizziness

If you experience any of the above, you should seek advice from your GP before trying to remove ear wax.

Olive Oil Ear drops

These soften the wax so that it comes out by itself without harming the ear. You will not always see wax come out. When you first use the drops your hearing may get worse so it can be a good idea to treat one ear at a time if both your ears are affected.

If you are prone to repeated wax build-up you can continue to use oil drops twice a week to prevent recurrence. You can continue for any length of time.

If olive oil does not work you can also buy sodium bicarbonate drops from pharmacies



Step-by-step guide to administering ear drops

- Make sure the drops are at room temperature before using them
- Lie on your side with the affected ear facing up when putting in drops
- Gently pull and push your outer ear to work the drops in
- Stay lying down for 10 minutes to allow the drops to soak into the earwax.

Bulb syringing

In most cases ear drops will clear a plug of earwax. However if this is unsuccessful a bulb syringe may be an alternative way to clear your ears from wax.

An ear bulb syringe is a small bulb shaped rubber object which can be filled with water and then used to squirt the water gently into the ear to remove ear wax.

The main benefit of the bulb syringe is that you can use it yourself **without** needing to make an appointment with your practice nurse or GP.

The risks of using a bulb syringe include ear infection, failure to remove the wax and eardrum perforation. These risks are low.

Bulb syringes can be purchased from a local pharmacy or online retailers and can be re-used. Costs vary, but bulb syringes are available from approximately £3. Please be aware that you should not share the bulb with other people for hygiene reasons.



Step-by-step guide to using a bulb syringe

It is essential to use olive oil drops twice a day for at least 14 days prior to bulb syringing to soften the wax. Alternatively you can purchase ear drops from your pharmacy (please read the manufacturer's leaflet.)

- Wash your hands
- Use a bowl of clean warm (not hot) water, that is warm to the touch, but not too hot or too cold on your skin
- Prepare the syringe by squirting it in the water a few times to fill it up with warm water
- Gently pull your outer ear up and out to help straighten out the canal and allow better access for the water
- Tilt your head so the ear to be treated is facing upwards
- Place the tip of the syringe into the opening of the ear - Do NOT push the syringe further into the ear - and GENTLY squirt one or more bulb syringes of water into your ear. (You can do this in the shower or the bath or lie on the bed with a towel underneath your head to catch the water)
- Allow the water to remain in your ear for at least 60 seconds
- Gently tilt your head in the opposite direction and wiggle the outer ear to help the water and wax come out. (This can be done over the sink)

If you experience any pain during or before this procedure stop immediately and see your practice nurse or GP for a review.

If, after three weeks or more, you are still having symptoms from wax, you will need to make an appointment with a doctor or nurse to decide what should be done.

Ear irrigation (ear syringing)

Ear irrigation is only recommended in the rare occasions where ear drops and bulb syringing has failed to work.

Ear syringing can lead to ear infections, perforated ear drum and tinnitus (persistent noise) and therefore it is only performed in exceptional circumstances.

If you think you have persisting wax despite taking the above measures please contact your GP surgery and make an appointment to discuss.

Who to contact

If you have any questions about these treatments you can speak to your pharmacist or GP for advice.

