

What Is Earwax?

Cerumen (se-roo-men) or earwax is a self-cleaning agent produced in your ears with protective, lubricating, and antibacterial properties. Earwax is not really a "wax" but a water-soluble mixture of secretions, plus hair and dead skin. Earwax is formed in the outer one-third of the ear canal, but not in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum.

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.

Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe that earwax should be routinely removed for personal hygiene. This is not so. In fact, attempting to remove earwax with cotton-tipped swabs, bobby pins, or other probing devices can result in damage to the ear, including trauma, impaction of the earwax, or even temporary deafness. These objects only push the wax in deeper, and can block the ear canal entirely.

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 your doctor. 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

If you or a child is experiencing any of these symptoms, you should seek the care of a medical professional to confirm that earwax is the cause. Do not attempt to remove the wax yourself. An otolaryngologist is a medical doctor who specifically deals with conditions of the ears and is trained to treat such a problem.

For more information on earwax, or to learn about other ENT health conditions, visit www.entnet.org.

