

Care of the ears – wax and swimming

Many people think that ears must be cleaned like our bodies to remain healthy but they actually clean themselves. Wax is produced by modified sebaceous glands associated with the hairs in the outer third of the ear canal. If it is found further in than this, then it has been pushed in by the use of cotton buds and can cause blockage and potential temporary hearing loss - or even puncture of the eardrum. The wax normally comes to the surface, dries, powders and drops off, or it can be removed with a face cloth or blunt finger nail.

The wax gets to the surface because the skin of the cylindrical outer ear canal grows sideward towards the surface. It does this just as the fingernail grows down the finger. It is like a moving belt and anything on the surface, such as dust and debris and the rare bit of sand that gets in, is carried to the surface. So the only dirty ears are in those who play with their ears or poke things in them.

Itchy ears are often incorrectly relieved using cotton swabs the repeated scratching can cause a thickening of the ear canal, much like a callous. This pushes wax even deeper into the ear canal.

Wax build-up: in some cases, ear wax accumulates. This is because some ear canals don't remove the wax like they are supposed to - they are too narrow so the natural cleaning process cannot do its job. If your ears feel gummy, or if wax obstructs your ear canal and you experience hearing loss: *Don't take matters into your own hands!*

Visit your [Ear Suctioning Clinic](#) where the nurse can safely remove the wax

Swimmer's ear (External Otitis)

This is common cause of ear pain. If the ear canal stays wet, it's a perfect place for bacteria and fungus to live and multiply, causing an infection. Otitis externa should be treated by a doctor. If left untreated, the ear pain will get worse and the infection may spread. To help relieve the pain until you see the doctor, you can place a warm washcloth against the affected ear. Any pressure on the outer ear may cause great pain, so it is often difficult to lie down with the affected side against a pillow. Many people with swimmer's ear have trouble sleeping until they get medical attention.

Swimmer's ear can be prevented by using over-the-counter drops of a dilute solution of acetic acid or alcohol in the ears after swimming, especially if one is prone to the infection. After time in the water, you should gently dry your ears with a towel and help water run out of your ears by turning your head to the side. Treatment of otitis externa depends on the severity of the infection. For most cases, your doctor may prescribe eardrops that contain **antibiotics** to fight the infection, mixed with a steroid to reduce swelling of the ear canal, for 7 to 10 days.

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