

## Earwax

**E**arwax is a natural part of your body's defense system. It not only serves as a protective barrier against dust—thus lubricating and keeping the ear canal clean—but it also kills certain germs.

Excess earwax is shed naturally from time to time, and you may notice a little at the opening of the ear canal. Children, in particular, have a lot of earwax, but this secretion seems to taper off as they grow older. Occasionally, however, earwax will not remove itself quickly enough. For some individuals it can build up, harden, and cause hearing problems.

If you need to remove excess earwax from the ear canal, it's important to remember not to use cotton swabs, such as Q-tips. Also, don't use your fingers or other objects to try to remove earwax, either. These methods will only push the wax closer to the eardrum.

A safer way to remove the earwax is by using mineral oil. Put two to three drops of mineral oil in the ear at bedtime. Do this for two to three days.

If this method does not work, then you might want to try flushing the softened wax out by using an ear syringe. Here is a word of caution: Never put water in the ear if you suspect an ear infection or a ruptured eardrum; also, never put water in the ear if you see discharge from the ear or if you have ear tubes.

An ear syringe is simply a device that will squirt water into the ear, thus flushing the softened wax out. It can be purchased at most drug stores. First, soften the wax with the mineral oil as before, except use three to five drops this time. Leave the oil in for only one to two hours. Fill the rubber bulb of the syringe with warm water, insert it part way into the ear canal, and squeeze the bulb to shoot a firm stream of water into the ear. It might help to pull your ear back a little in order to straighten the ear canal so the stream of water will flow more effectively. You may need to do this a few times in order to get the best results.

There are also other over-the-counter wax softeners that you might want to try if the mineral oil doesn't work for you. Again, these products can also be followed by gently flushing with the ear syringe.

If the home treatment methods just described don't work, or if you prefer to have some assistance in flushing out the softened wax, call your medical professional. This is especially true if you believe that earwax is causing a hearing problem, if the wax build-up is hard and dry, or if the ear is sore and bleeding.

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- Connect to our Web site at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org)
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.

- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

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If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.

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