

Cerumen

Cerumen (pronounced “*se-roo-men*”), or earwax, comprises multiple different components. Although referred to simply as “wax,” cerumen actually contains a mixture of hair, dead skin, and water-soluble products released by skin cells. This product, produced by the ear canal skin cells, additionally serves multiple purposes. First, wax is a protective barrier within the ear canal against dust and dirt particles. Second, cerumen contains anti-bacterial properties to protect against infection. And finally, cerumen lubricates the ear canals which prevents excessive dryness. Without earwax, the ear canal skin can become dry and itchy.

In most people, ear canals are “self-cleaning.” Earwax and skin cells migrate from the ear drum to the opening of the ear canal. Assisted by motion of the jaw with chewing, old earwax is transported out of the ear canal.

It is a common misconception that earwax should be routinely removed for hygienic purposes. Attempts at removal may result in further damage to the ear canal skin or the ear drum with potentially harmful consequences in terms of ear drum injury, infection or hearing loss. Cerumen is only produced by glands and skin the outer 1/3 of the ear canal; it is not produced by the skin cells near the ear drum. When wax accumulates near the ear drum, it is typically due to the use of cotton swabs, Q-tips, wax softening drops, or tissues within the ear canal. These objects not only push the wax deeper into the ear canal but also make the cleaning process more difficult.

Some patients may develop symptoms due to cerumen impaction, the excessive accumulation of earwax. These symptoms may include earache, ear fullness or plugging, hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing or noises in the ear), itching, odor, or discharge. Under these circumstances, the ear should be evaluated by an Ear, Nose and Throat physician and cleaned as necessary.

At home, ear cleaning is best limited to the outside of the ear with a washcloth or finger. Do not insert anything into the ear canal.

You may also place a few drops of mineral oil, baby oil or commercially available drops into the ear products (such as Debrox). This may also help soften the ear wax.

There are no proven ways to prevent cerumen impaction; however, we strongly advise the avoidance of cotton swabs or other objects placed into the ears. If you are prone to repeated wax impaction or use hearing aids, we recommend routine visits to your doctor at regular intervals for a checkup and routine cleaning.