

## A Primer on Managing Earwax

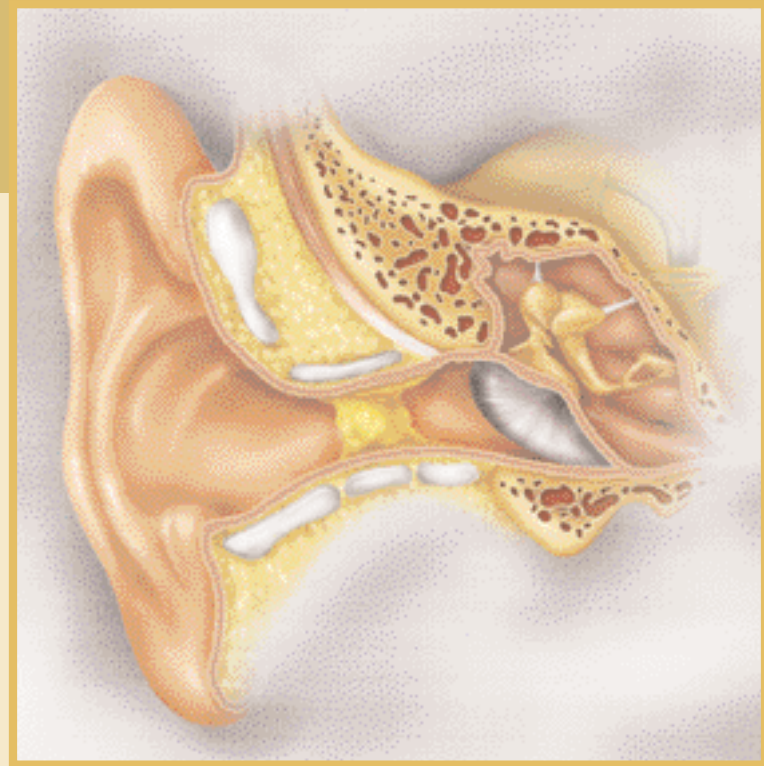
Cerumen, or earwax, is a naturally occurring substance in our ears. Glands that lie under the skin of the ear canal secrete cerumen into the ear canal. Cerumen is present as a protection for the soft, vulnerable skin that lines our ear canal. It helps to protect the ear canal by trapping dirt and slowing the growth of bacteria.

### Excessive Earwax

In most people, a small amount of cerumen regularly makes its way to the opening of the ear canal, where it is washed away or falls out as new wax is secreted. If a person secretes an excessive amount of wax, or if the wax becomes lodged in the ear canal, the wax may block sounds from entering the ear.

Most people do not need to have special care in managing cerumen, but there are about 150,000 patients who undergo special care to have earwax removed every week.<sup>1</sup> If cerumen is not removed correctly, complications might include pain, a perforated tympanum, dizziness, bleeding, and infection.

The key to cerumen management is preven-



ILLUSTRATION/NICOLE JONES

tion of wax buildup and, when needed, appropriate care.<sup>1</sup>

### Good Ear Practices

When cerumen begins to build in the ear canal, there are a few management recommendations.<sup>2</sup> One is to use a softening agent to make the wax expel more easily. Unfortunately, softening agents may only loosen the outer layers of the wax and still leave more impacted cerumen in the ear canal.

If routine hygiene does not effectively manage cerumen, earwax removal kits are available in many pharmacies for further help. Earwax removal kits are normally inexpensive; however, the effectiveness of these kits depends upon how hard or soft the cerumen is when irrigated with solution.

If cerumen remains in the ear canal after following the directions provided by an earwax removal kit, it is highly recommended that a patient consult an audiologist or physician.<sup>1,3,4</sup>

A person should never attempt to dig out earwax with cotton swabs or other items. Digging into the ear canal simply pushes the wax further into the ear canal and helps to compact the wax, which can make it more difficult to remove.

Digging also frequently does serious damage to the lining of the ear canal, and even to the eardrum.

### Professional Treatment

For people who need a practitioner's help to manage earwax, a metal ear syringe and DeVilbiss ear irrigator are frequently used to remove cerumen. If earwax buildup is a recurring problem, a professional may recommend that a patient use a wax removal medication, such as carbamide peroxide (Debrox® or Murine® Ear Drops).

### References

1. Grossan, M. (1998). Cerumen removal—current challenges. *Ear Nose and Throat Journal*, 77 (7): 541-546.
2. Mayo Clinic Health Information. Earwax blockage. Accessed via [www.walgreens.com/library/topics/EarWax.jhtml](http://www.walgreens.com/library/topics/EarWax.jhtml)
3. Aung, T., Mulley, G.P. (2002). Removal of earwax. *British Medical Journal*, 325: 27.
4. Jegoux, F., Legent, F., Beauvillain de Montreuil, C. (2002). Chronic cough and earwax. *The Lancet*, 360: 618.

### For More Information

American Speech-Language  
Hearing Association  
[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

Mayo Clinic  
[www.mayo.edu](http://www.mayo.edu)

Medline Plus  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000979.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000979.htm)

University of Iowa Health Care  
[www.uihealthcare.com/topics/earnosethroat/earn4453.html](http://www.uihealthcare.com/topics/earnosethroat/earn4453.html)

Washington State University  
[www.hws.wsu.edu/brochures/ear.htm](http://www.hws.wsu.edu/brochures/ear.htm)