

DESCRIPTION

Overproduction of earwax (cerumen), causing blockage of the external ear canal. Wax is produced by glands in the ear to protect the canal leading from the eardrum to the outside. The amount of wax produced varies from person to person. Some produce so little wax that it never accumulates. Others produce enough to block the canal every few months.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Decreased hearing.
- Ear pain.
- Plugged feeling in the ear.
- Ringing in the ear.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Exposure to dust or debris.
- Family history of overproduction of earwax.
- Water in the ear, which can cause the wax to swell.
- Use of cotton swabs in an attempt to clean the ear canal.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Avoid areas where the air is dusty or filled with debris. This stimulates overproduction of earwax. Consider wearing earplugs if you must be in this type of environment.
- Monthly use of 1 to 2 drops of glycerin in the ear may soften the wax and prevent recurrent blockage.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Ear infection.
- Eardrum damage.

GENERAL MEASURES

To remove earwax at home:

- Buy wax-softening eardrops at a drug store.
- Lie down with the affected ear toward the ceiling.
- Pull the top of the ear gently up and back toward the back of the head.
- Instill the eardrops; use the amount indicated in the package directions.
- Leave the drops in the ear for 20 minutes. Continue to lie down, if possible. Plug the ear with cotton.
- Sit up, leaning a little toward the affected side.
- Use a soft, rubber bulb syringe to irrigate the ear canal gently with plain warm water or equal parts warm water and hydrogen peroxide.
- Repeat irrigations until the ear feels clear. If the ear doesn't clear, call our office, so that wax can be removed with a probe, hook, or forceps, or by suction.
- Don't try to remove wax with a stick or cotton swab. You may damage the eardrum or cause infection in the ear canal.
Caution: If you have a perforated eardrum, don't try to remove wax.

MEDICATIONS

For minor pain, you may use nonprescription pain medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF

- You have symptoms of an earwax blockage that does not clear, despite treatment described above.
- Fever and ear pain accompany the earwax blockage. Do not irrigate the ear in this case.