

Your Health

By Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

The Facts About Earwax

Earwax is part of the ear's natural defence system against germs and other particles. The only way to detect a build-up of earwax is to have a physician examine the ear with an otoscope. The main problem is that earwax can completely cover the eardrum. When a doctor looks into an ear, he or she can't see the eardrum and therefore can't determine whether or not there is an infection or other problem.

Contrary to popular belief, a build-up of earwax does not cause ear infections or other serious problems. In very rare cases, earwax can build up to the point where it can actually reduce hearing. This can easily be corrected by removing the wax completely. Some people tend to produce more wax than others—we don't really know why—and some families more than others. Some families also tend to produce hard, thick earwax, while the earwax others produce is soft and fine.

How can earwax be fully removed?

Parents are sometimes too keen in trying to clean their children's ears (or their own), so the first thing I advise is that Q-tips or other long items should not be placed in the ear. This could damage or pierce the eardrum. When giving a small child a bath, washing gently around the outer ear with a wet face cloth is sufficient. If a child tends to have a lot of earwax, putting a few drops of mineral oil or baby oil in the ear and covering it with a cotton ball for the night can help. Doing this once or twice should be enough. Drops called cerumenolytic agents are available on the market and are designed to melt or break down the wax. They are not recommended because they tend to irritate the ear canal.

Sometimes earwax cannot be completely removed this way, so it should be handled by a doctor or qualified nurse. One technique is to clean the ear using a syringe. While the child or adult is lying down, a syringe filled with hot water is gently inserted into the ear and the water is injected into the canal to move and get rid

of the wax. Sometimes the procedure needs to be repeated a few times before the wax is completely gone.

The other approach is to use a curette - a thin instrument held like a pencil - to directly remove or literally scoop out the wax. Looking directly into the ear with a light, the doctor gently removes the wax with the curette. These techniques are not usually painful, but are obviously more difficult to perform with young children. When the wax is very hard, parents are sometimes asked to put a few drops of oil or hydrogen peroxide in the ear beforehand so that the wax softens up and is easier to remove.

Dr. Paul Roumeliotis is the Medical Officer of Health for the Eastern Ontario Health Unit and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, McGill University. © Dr. Paul Roumeliotis