

# Looking after your ears factsheet

**Did you know...** ear wax is produced to help protect your ears and keep them clean? Ear wax can trap debris and stop it going deeper into the ear where it could cause infection.

The skin in your ears acts like a conveyor belt; as it grows it travels along your ear canal, from your ear drum to the entrance of your ear, bringing wax and debris with it.

When it reaches the outside, the wax can simply be wiped away with a clean tissue or flannel.



Using cotton buds, or anything else, to clean your ears can disrupt your ears' natural cleaning system.

Often, cotton buds only act to push wax further down the ear canal, which can cause hearing difficulty, itching or coughing.

More seriously there is a risk of damaging the delicate skin in the ear canal or perforating your eardrum, which can cause ringing, dizziness and hearing loss.



Remember, ear wax is normal. However, there are certain cases where excessive ear wax may need to be managed:

- if it is preventing a specialist from examining your ear fully, carrying out hearing tests or taking impressions of your ear for hearing aid ear moulds
- if you use hearing aids, and the wax is affecting how they work
- in the unlikely event that wax is thought to be contributing to ear symptoms, such as hearing loss, earache, tinnitus or vertigo.



Sometimes, the ear's 'conveyor belt' motion needs to be supported by wax softening drops, such as olive oil. If you have wax build-up that is very hard, sodium bicarbonate drops are an alternative; to avoid irritation these should only be used for 7-10 days at a time.

If prolonged use of drops is ineffective, wax removal by a qualified clinician may be required. This may be the practice nurse at your GP surgery or another local service. If you have had previous ear surgery, this would usually be performed on an ENT aural care clinic.

