**Patient Information Leaflet**

**EAR WAX**

**Portcullis Surgery is committed to providing best practice & high-quality medical care.**

**Current guidelines state that ear drops should be used to soften the wax which will then enable the natural movement of the wax from the ear. Further information and treatment options are available in this leaflet.**

**What is ear wax?**

Ear wax is a build-up of dead cells, hair, foreign material such as dust and cerumen. Cerumen is the natural wax produced by the ear. It forms a protective coating of the skin in the ear canal. Small amounts are made all the time. Flakes or crusts of earwax breakoff and fall out of the ear from time to time. This is body’s normal process.

**Points to remember:**

* Ear wax is normal and it provides protection for your ears.
* Your ears are self-cleaning.
* The movement of your jaw whilst eating & talking helps to move the wax along the canal.
* A plug of earwax is not a serious problem. You only need to remove earwax if it is causing symptoms such as dulled hearing or when fitting a hearing aid.

**What makes ear wax worse?**

* The amount of wax produced varies from person to person.
* Some people produce excess wax and this can block the ear.
* Wearing a hearing aid, ear plugs or headphones can interfere with wax expulsion.
* Narrow and/or hairy ear canals.
* If you are elderly - the wax produced may be harder and drier.
* Dry skin in people who suffer with eczema or psoriasis.

**What you should not do?**

* Do not use a cotton bud to clean your ear. This forces the wax deeper into the canal and can cause damage and infection.
* If your ears are itchy do not scratch or rub them with your fingernails or any other objects.
* ***Do not use anything smaller than your elbow in your ear!***

**What helps?**

* Try and keep your ears dry. When washing your hair, showering or swimming putting some Vaseline around the inner part of your ear or covering them with silicon ear plugs available from sports shops, chemists and online shops can help.
* Do not put your head under the water when bathing.
* Some people are troubled by repeated build-up of earwax and may benefit from regular use of ear drops.

**Preventing earwax build-up:**

* You can’t prevent earwax. It’s there to protect your ears from dirt and germs. However, you can keep using ear drops to soften the wax. This will help it fall out on its own and should prevent blocked ears. If you are prone to repeated wax build-up you can continue to use olive oil drops twice a week to prevent recurrence.

**Using ear drops:**

* Ear drops alone will clear a plug of earwax in most cases. Put 2 or 3 drops of ordinary olive oil down the ear using a ‘dropper’ 2 or 3 times a day for 2-3 weeks. This softens the wax so that it then runs out of its own accord without harming the ear. You can continue for any length of time, but 3 weeks is usually enough. Surprisingly, you will not necessarily see wax come out. It often seems to come out unnoticed.
* If olive oil does not work you can buy sodium bicarbonate drops from your local pharmacy.
* Do not use any ears drops if you have a hole in your eardrum (called a perforated eardrum).

**How to best use ear drops?**

1. Warm the drops to room temperature before using them
2. Pour a few drops into the affected ear
3. Lie with the affected ear uppermost when putting in drops
4. Stay like this for 10 minutes to allow the drops to soak into the earwax

**Alternatively, i.e. if simple ear drops don’t work:**

There are now many over-the-counter kits available from pharmacies or online (search ear wax bulb syringe) and research shows this is safe, effective and could significantly reduce NHS costs.

These contain a wax softener as drops which you use for 3-4 days and a small bulb syringe to enable you to remove the wax from your ear canals yourself. The specially designed ear syringes are designed to create just enough pressure to clear wax out of the ear without causing damage to the ear drum.

It is very important to follow the kit’s instructions.

**When to seek help from a health professional?**

If you are experiencing any of the following symptoms:

* Pain
* Discharge or bleeding from the ear
* Sudden deafness
* Dizziness
* Foreign bodies (you may be advised to attend MIU/A&E)

Your GP or practice nurse will look inside your ears to check if they are blocked and might carry out some simple hearing tests. You may be referred to the ENT department of your nearest hospital for more specialised treatments.

**Ear irrigation (ear syringing):**

Ear irrigation is no longer recommended as first line treatment for blocked ears. It is not a requirement to provide this service in General Practice

**Potential Side Effects of Ear Syringing**

Ear syringing can lead to

* ear infections,
* perforated ear drum and
* tinnitus (persistent noise).

Irrigation should NOT be carried out in patients:

* + who are due to travel within the next 2 weeks on an airplane-may be suitable for microsuction instead
	+ have previously experienced complications following this procedure in the past- may suitable for microsuction instead
	+ have undergone ANY form of ear surgery (apart from grommets that have extruded at least 18 months previously and it is documented subsequently that the tympanic membrane is intact)- may be suitable for microsuction instead
	+ have an ear perforation- may be suitable for microsuction instead
	+ have a history of a mucous discharge in the past 12 months – may be suitable for microsuction instead
	+ have evidence of acute otitis externa with pain and tenderness of the pinna
	+ have a history of a middle ear infection in the last six weeks

***Microsuction as an alternative to ear syringing***

Microsuction is the method usually employed by ENT services because it is quick and efficient and allows the clinician a good view of the ear canal and drum. It is the method of choice if irrigation has failed or if the person has external or middle ear pathology.

Microsuction removal treatment is a far more gentle procedure than other types of ear wax removal. It is also suitable for patients who are about to fly, are already hearing aid users, have previous ear drum damage or have impacted ear wax.

Microsuction also offers several benefits compared to irrigation such as:

* The procedure is quicker.
* Your doctor can clearly see inside your ear during the procedure.
* Microsuction doesn’t expose your ear canal to moisture.

Unlike irrigation, microsuction can often be performed on people who have:

* a [ruptured eardrum](https://www.healthline.com/health/ruptured-eardrum)
* a history of ear surgery
* foreign matter in their ear
* mild [otitis externa](https://www.healthline.com/health/otitis-externa) (outer ear infection)

***We will always prioritise ear syringing or microsuction for patients who have been referred for specialist ear testing (audiology). Proof of an audiology appointment needs to be provided and then a nurse appointment will be booked as a priority.***