There are no proven ways to prevent cerumen impaction, but not inserting cotton-tipped swabs or other objects in the canal is strongly advised. If you are prone to repeated wax impaction or use hearing aids, consider seeing your doctor every 6-12 months for a check up and routine preventive cleaning.

When Should I Call a Doctor?
If the home treatments discussed in this brochure are not satisfactory or if wax has accumulated so much that it blocks the ear canal (and hearing), a physician may prescribe ear drops designed to soften wax, or he may wash or vacuum it out. Occasionally, an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist) may need to remove the wax using microscopic visualization.

If there is a possibility of a hole (perforation or puncture possibly from injury or an ear tube) in the eardrum, consult a physician prior to trying any over-the-counter remedies. Putting eardrops or other products in the ear with the presence of an eardrum perforation may cause pain or an infection. Certainly, washing water through such a hole or tube could start an infection.

For any questions regarding your condition or treatment, please do not hesitate to contact our office at...

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- What is Cerumen?
- When Should Ears be Cleaned?
- How Should Ears be Cleaned?
- How is Ear Wax Prevented?
**What is Ear Wax?**

Cerumen (se-roo-men) or ear wax is a self-cleaning agent produced in your ears with protective, lubricating, and antibacterial properties. Ear wax is not really a “wax” but a water-soluble mixture of secretions, plus hair and dead skin. Ear wax is formed in the outer one-third of the ear canal, but not in the deep part of the ear canal near the eardrum.

Most of the time the ear canals are self-cleaning; that is, there is a slow and orderly migration of ear wax and skin cells from the eardrum to the ear opening. Old ear wax is constantly being transported, assisted by chewing and jaw motion, from the ear canal to the ear opening where it usually dries, flakes, and falls out.

Because ear wax is only formed in the outer one-third of the canal, it is often because of probing the ear with such things as cotton-tipped applicators, bobby pins, or twisted napkin corners that wax gets pushed up against the ear drum. Placing objects into the ear canal blindly often works like a tamping rod pushing the wax deeper.

Under ideal circumstances, the ear canals should never have to be cleaned. However, that isn’t always the case. The ears should be cleaned when enough ear wax accumulates to cause symptoms or prevents adequate assessment by your doctor. This condition is called cerumen impaction, and may cause one or more of the following symptoms:

- Earache, fullness in the ear, or a sensation of a plugged ear.
- Tinnitus, ringing, or noises in the ear.
- Itching, odor, or discharge.
- Decreased hearing, which may be progressive.
- Coughing, which is due to a strange anatomical anomaly known as Arnold’s Nerve.

**What NOT to Do**

**Cotton Swabs.** Wax blockage is one of the most common causes of hearing loss. This is often caused by attempts to clean the ear with cotton swabs. Most cleaning attempts merely push the wax deeper into the ear canal, causing blockage.

The outer ear is the funnel-like part of the ear that can be seen on the side of the head, plus the ear canal (the hole that leads down to the eardrum). The canal is shaped somewhat like an hourglass narrowing part way down. The skin of the outer part of the canal has special glands that produce ear wax, which is meant to trap dust and dirt to keep it from reaching the ear drum. Usually the wax will accumulate, dry out, and come out on its own carrying debris with it.

**Ear Candling.**

**Ear Candles ARE NOT A SAFE OR EFFECTIVE OPTION OF WAX REMOVAL AND MAY RESULT IN SERIOUS INJURY!** The most common injuries are burns, obstruction of the ear canal with candle wax, and perforation of the ear drum.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) became concerned about the safety issues with ear candling after receiving reports of patient injury caused by the procedure. There are no controlled studies or other scientific evidence that support the safety and effectiveness of these devices for any of the purported claims or intended uses as contained in the labeling. Based on these growing concerns, the FDA has undertaken several successful regulatory actions since 1996 that are based upon violations of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act for posing imminent danger to health.

**Ear Cleaning: Safe Methods**

**Best Option:** Wash the external ear with a cloth, do not insert anything into the canal.

Most cases respond to treatments to soften wax. A few drops of mineral oil or softening oil 1-2 times a week will help your baby oil naturally clean themselves and is safe to do with a perforation or ear tube.