



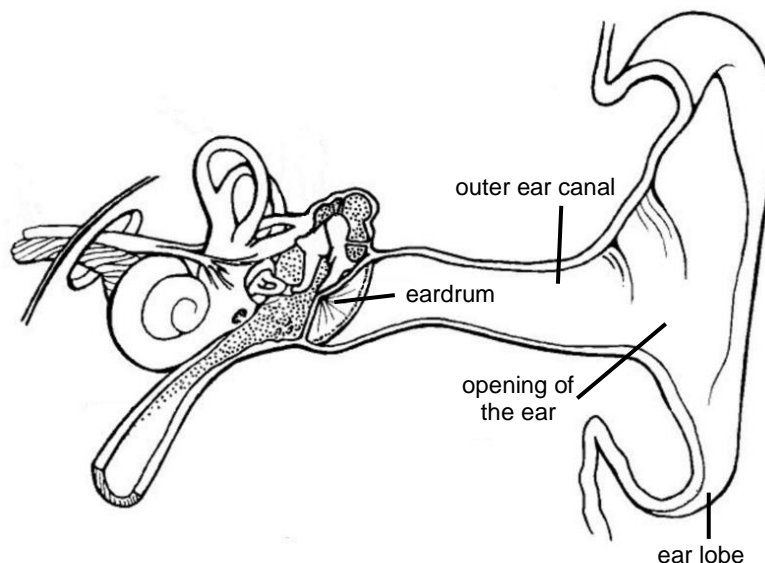
**NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S**  
*When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.*

# Earwax

Earwax or cerumen (SUH-rum-un) is a sticky, waxy, yellowish substance made in the outer ear canal. This is the place between the eardrum and the opening of the ear (Picture 1). There are special glands in this area that make earwax. Once the wax is made, it slowly moves out toward the opening of the ear. The ear then sheds the wax naturally when a person showers or swims or it falls out on its own.

Earwax keeps the ears healthy:

- protects and moisturizes the skin of the ear canal
- has special chemicals that help to fight infection in the ear canal
- shields the eardrum by trapping dirt and dust that enters the ear. If these get down into the canal, they can injure or irritate the eardrum.



**Picture 1** Earwax is made in the outer ear

## **Impacted earwax**

- When earwax builds up and gets stuck in the ear, it is called an impaction or blockage.
- Impacted earwax is usually caused when someone puts an object, such as a cotton swab, bobby pin, or rolled napkin corner into the ear to scratch or clean it. The object pushes the earwax down deeper into the ear canal.
- Children more prone to impacted earwax may:
  - be born with narrower ear canals.
  - make a lot of extra ear wax normally.
  - have a dry skin condition, such as eczema.
  - have a history of frequent infections of the outer ear, called external otitis.
  - keep too much moisture in the ear if water cannot drain out properly.
- Using earplugs or earbuds often can push wax back down into the ear.

## **Symptoms of impacted earwax**

A child may have no symptoms of an impaction. If they do have symptoms, the most common are:

- earache
- problems hearing – muffled sounds, decreased hearing
- dizziness
- fullness, pressure, or plugged ears
- ringing in the ears
- itchiness inside the ear
- drainage or odor from the ear
- Sometimes, you can see the hard wax stuck in the ear.

## **Treatment for impacted earwax**

- If your child has no symptoms, then no treatment may be needed. Over time, the problem may go away on its own.
- Do not use any folk remedies, such as ear candles, without first checking with your child's health care provider. Ear candles are not safe or effective.

- If your child has symptoms, call the health care provider. They may ask you to bring your child to the office for treatment or recommend ways to try to soften the earwax at home.
  - Use an ear dropper to put drops (only ones approved by the health care provider), mineral oil, baby oil, or glycerin into the ear.
  - Put a few drops of hydrogen peroxide diluted with warm water, a 50/50 mix, into the ear canal. Do not use a bulb syringe without checking first.
- Treatments that should only be done by a health care provider include:
  - Flushing the ear canal with warm water using gentle pressure.
  - Removing the earwax with small, special tools.

## **Prevention**

- **Never put a cotton swab, finger, paperclip or any other object in your child's ear canal. This can cause injury, bleeding and make an ear wax impaction worse.**
- If recommended by the health care provider, use ear drops once a week.
- Follow-up with the health care provider to have your child's ears cleaned regularly.

## **When to call the health care provider**

Call if your child has pain, discomfort, or bleeding from the ear after being treated or has problems hearing.