

# Earwax is nature's defense against objects and infections

## Overabundance can be removed safely and effectively without cotton swabs

UT San Diego News, May 15, 2012

As much as some of us try to get rid of earwax, you'd think it was somehow hurtful or dangerous. The truth is earwax is actually the good guy. Producing earwax is nature's way<sup>sm</sup> of lubricating our ears and protecting them.

Removing earwax can make our ears itch, crack and sometimes get infected. Earwax also acts as a filter. It prevents harmful things like bugs, sand and dirt from getting into our ears and to the ear drum. It's also antimicrobial. Earwax has substances in it that prevent infections from entering the body. Think of earwax as the body's own natural antibiotics.

For all of its attributes, though, earwax doesn't help much against larger foreign bodies that children sometimes stick in their ears like corn kernels, beads and Q-tips. Most of us started using cotton swabs to clean our ears and our children's ears with the idea that removing earwax keeps the ears clean. Constant cleaning, however, removes the natural waxy lubrication from the ear canal and can create itching. Many of us then attempt to treat itchy ears with cotton swabs, making the symptoms worse and creating a chronic cycle.

To break the cycle, first stop using cotton swabs. Then, use lubrication such as 5 drops of extra virgin olive oil ("sweet oil") with a small dropper two to three times per day for about a week. This can be repeated as necessary and sometimes has to be repeated every month.

Some ears are so itchy that over the counter 1 percent hydrocortisone cream can be used twice a day for a week. Be cautious about how you get it into the canal – just use your finger and nothing smaller. Some patients have such bad problems with itching that a prescription eardrop, which is oil with steroid in it, has to be used.

Using a cotton swab to clean your ears is futile. Wax is made in the outer one third of the ear canal by glands. Some people's wax is dry, some gooey, some hard, some soft. It doesn't really matter which type you have because it still provides that protective function.

A cotton swab actually pushes wax further into unoccupied space in the ear canal. When you do this every day and keep stuffing the canal full, you end up with too much wax or an impaction. Sometimes the wax is so far down that you need to consult a professional ENT doctor to remove the wax with a microscope so that your eardrum is not damaged.

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There are some safe and effective ways to remove an overabundance of earwax. The cheapest and most useful is hydrogen peroxide, which bubbles and helps dissolve the wax without pain. The bubbling creates an unusual sensation, but it is not dangerous. You can make a half water-half peroxide mixture and put five drops in the ear canal at night. I recommend alternating ears each night, so you would be able to lie on one side and let the solution soak in to dissolve the wax.

There are a few people who really do have wax overproduction but jamming a cotton swab in your ear never helps. Hydrogen peroxide and professional cleaning by an ENT are the best solutions.

*Dr. Marcella Bothwell is a pediatric otolaryngologist at Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego and a clinical professor in the department of surgery at UC San Diego. She can be reached at [mbothwell@rchsd.org](mailto:mbothwell@rchsd.org)*

By Dr. Marcella Bothwell