Ear Wax

A self-help guide

**What is ear wax?**

Ear wax is build-up of dead cells, hair, foreign material such as dust and cerumen. Cerumen is the natural wax produced by glands in 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.

If you feel there is a build-up of wax in your ear(s) please read the following self-help guide as you may not require an appointment.

**Points to remember**

* Ear was is normal and it provides protection for your ears
* Your ears are self-cleaning
* The movement of your jaw whilst eating and talking helps to move the wax along the ear canal.
* Ear wax only becomes a problem if it causes deafness, pain or if a health professional needs a clear view of the ear drum.

**What makes ear wax worse?**

* The amount of wax produced varies from person to person.
* Some people produce excessive amounts of wax and this can block the ear canal.
* Wearing a hearing aid, ear plugs or head phones 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:**

* Use cotton buds to clean the ear. This forces the wax deeper into the canal and can cause damage, trauma and possible infection.
* Do not use objects such as matches, hair grips, crochet hooks, knitting needles, keys etc, this can cause trauma and possible infection.
* If your ears are itchy do not scratch or rub them with your finger nails 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 can help.
* Don’t 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.

**What you can do to manage the problem?**

**Ear drops** – olive oil ear drops are a safe, effective way to clear earwax in most cases. The oil softens the wax so that it runs out, without harming the ear. You will not necessarily see the wax come out. If prone to repeated ear wax build up you can use olive oil ear drops twice a week, long term to prevent recurrence. If olive oil does not work you can also try other ear drops, available over the counter from your pharmacist.

**Use of ear drops –**

1. Lie on your side with the affected ear uppermost.
2. Pull the outer ear gently backwards and upwards to straighten the ear canal.
3. Put 2-3 drops of almond or olive oil into the affected ear(s) and gently massage just in front of the ear.
4. Stay lying on your side for 10 minutes to allow the wax to soak up the oil.
5. Afterwards, wipe away any excess oil but do not plug your ear with cotton wool as this simply absorbs the oil.
6. Your hearing problem may initially worsen after first starting to use ear drops; this is why you are advised to concentrate on treating one ear at a time if both ears are blocked with wax.
7. In most cases, after 14 days. The wax will have softened sufficiently to encourage the wax to come out.
8. Continue for 2-3 weeks. If the wax has not resolved you may wish to try bulb syringing.

**Bulb Syringing**

Bulb syringing is a safe, alternate way to remove ear wax. Bulb syringes can be easily purchased from a pharmacy and used at home. Research shows that bulb syringing is effective and acceptable to patients and could significantly reduce the use of NHS resources.

**Instructions for bulb syringing:**

Use olive oil drops twice a day for at least 14 days prior to bulb syringing. Or alternatively use sodium-bicarbonate ear drops purchased from your pharmacy (please read the manufacturers leaflet)

* Wash your hands.
* Use a bowl of cooled, boiled water that is warm to the touch, not too hot or too cold.
* Prepare the syringe by squirting water in and out of it into the bowl a few times.
* Gently pull your outer ear ‘up and out’ to help straighten out the canal, which will allow better access for the water.
* Tilt your head so the ear to be treated is upmost.
* Place the tip of the syringe into the opening of the ear. Do NOT push the syringe further into the ear. Gently squirt one of more bulb syringes of water into your ear.
* Allow the water to remain in your ear for at least 60 seconds. Gently tilt your head in the opposite site direction and wiggle your outer ear.

**Ear irrigation (ear syringing):**

Ear syringing is no longer carried out at Parkway. You would need to seek an alternative provider on a private basis.

Ear syringing can lead to ear infections, perforated ear drum and tinnitus (persistent noise) and therefore it is only advised in certain circumstances. If you think you have persisting wax despite taking the above measures please make an appointment with your doctor or nurse to discuss.

For certain conditions we are able to refer for micro-suction.