**Ear Care Information For patients**

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**Bredon Hill Surgery**

**What is earwax?**

Earwax is a waxy material produced by glands inside the ear. It helps keep our ears healthy and clean; it stops the skin that lines our ear canal from drying and cracking and protects the ear by trapping dirt and repelling water so it helps to prevent infections.

Most of the time our ear canals clean themselves; as we talk, chew and move our jaws the earwax and skin cells slowly move from the eardrum to the ear opening where it usually dries, and falls out. Earwax doesn't usually cause problems, but if too much earwax is produced it can cause a blockage which can be painful or could cause hearing loss.

**What is the best way to clean my ears?**

**Ear Drops - yes**

A lot of people use eardrops as the first option for wax removal. These may soften or loosen the wax, so it can work its way out naturally. There are many ear drops on the market. The active ingredients tend to be hydrogen peroxide, sodium bicarbonate, or sodium chloride. These drops might be effective, but they can also be irritating for people with sensitive skin.

Instead, olive oil and almond oil drops appear to be just as good as more costly commercial products.

**How to use drops**

If using olive oil or almond oil to soften your wax - warm the oil up to body temperature.

1. Lie down on your side with affected ear uppermost.

2. Pull the ear backwards and upwards. Allow 2 or 3 drops of olive oil to fall into the ear canal. Then massage the area just in front of the ear.

3. Stay lying down for about 5 minutes to allow the drops to run down the ear canal.

4. Place cotton wool coated with Vaseline at the entrance to the ear canal in order to keep the olive oil in the ear and to work more effectively.

5. Repeat the procedure with the opposite ear if you have a wax problem there.

Olive oil is unlikely to cause any irritation to your ear, but it takes quite a long time to have an effect on the wax. You might need to repeat this two or three times a day for upto **4 weeks** to soften a waxy build-up and allow the wax to come away naturally.

If **after 4 weeks of using olive oil** the wax has not cleared, please make an appointment with the nurse or doctor, for your ears to be checked and for further advice on how to clear the wax.

**Ear Irrigation – sometimes.**

This technique involves using a tool to push a pressurised flow of water into the ear canal to dislodge the wax.

Most wax can be cleared by using oil or ear drops for the specified time and technique. In the event that this has not been successful, it may be necessary for the ear to be irrigated to remove the wax.

An assessment of the ear will need to be made by a Nurse and irrigation may be carried out at their discretion.

However, although this may remove the wax***, it can sometimes be painful and may even damage the ear drum.***

**Micro-Suction - sometimes**

If symptoms persist you can book an appointment with a Doctor or Nurse to look at your ears. Ear irrigation may be carried out to clear the wax butif this has not been successful or indicated then you may be advised to have Micro-suction to clear the wax. This is not available on the NHS in this area at the moment. Specsavers offer this service locally. There will be a charge for it.

During this procedure a clinician will use a microscope to look into the ear canal and a very tiny suction device to suck out the wax. This technique can be a very safe and effective way to removing persistent blockages.

**Cotton Buds – No**

Problems often arise when we try to clean out this wax using our finger, or even worse, a cotton bud. Despite many people using cotton buds to clean their ears, manufacturers actually advise against using them in the external auditory canal. Next time you reach for one of these innocuous-looking implements, have a look on the packet. You will probably find a safety warning which will tell you that cotton buds ‘should not be inserted into the ear canal. When cotton buds are used, what we actually end up doing is pushing earwax deeper into the ear where it gets stuck in the parts that don’t, and can’t, clean themselves. The trapped earwax may also contain bacteria from the outer ear that could cause infection. Furthermore, removing wax with a cotton bud can irritate the skin of the ear, and this often encourages people to poke around even more; it’s a vicious cycle. However, in some cases if the bud is inserted too far into the ear, there is a risk of perforating the eardrum, causing sudden pain, bleeding and temporary hearing loss.

**Ear Candles – No** Ear candles are marketed as an easy solution for people wanting to get rid of their wax. The technique involves placing a lit, hollow cone-shaped beeswax candle in the ear. This is supposed to draw the wax, and other impurities, out of the ear.

Research has shown that not only is ear candling ineffective at removing earwax, but it can be dangerous. It can burn the face and ear, it can leave wax in the canal, and it can also puncture the ear drum.

**Long term prevention of wax build-up .**

If you suffer from excessive wax, regular use of olive oil can help the ear clean itself. Instill 2-3 drops of olive oil at night once a week. Olive oil can be bought in a dropper bottle from your local chemist.

**However, most of us have got completely normal amount of wax in our ears. So, unless you have a real problem, leave your ears well alone**

**Useful links**

* [NICE clinical Knowledge Summary](http://cks.nice.org.uk/earwax#!topicsummary) (cks.nice.org.uk)
* [Study: Cochrane Review assessing the effectiveness of ear drops for the removal of wax](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD004326.pub2/pdf/standard) (onlinelibrary.wiley.com)
* [NHS Earwax](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Earwax/Pages/Treatment.aspx) ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk))

Private clinics are not likely to offer ear syringing