

Cerumen (Earwax) Impaction

What is Cerumen Impaction?

Cerumen impaction is a condition in which earwax has become tightly packed in the external ear canal to the point that the canal is blocked.

Description

Cerumen impaction develops when earwax accumulates in the inner part of the ear canal and blocks the eardrum. It affects between 2-6% of the general population in the United States. Impaction does not happen under normal circumstances because cerumen is produced by glands in the outer part of the ear canal; it is not produced in the inner part. The cerumen traps sand or dust particles before they reach the ear drum. It also protects the outer part of the ear canal because it repels water. The slow movement of the outer layer of skin of the ear canal carries cerumen toward the outer opening of the ear. As the older cerumen reaches the opening of the ear, it dries out and falls away.

Causes

Cerumen is most likely to become impacted when it is pushed against the eardrum by cotton-tipped applicators, hair pins, or other objects that people put in their ears; and when it is trapped against the eardrum by a hearing aid. Less common causes of cerumen impaction include overproduction of earwax by the glands in the ear canal, or an abnormally shaped ear canal.

Symptoms

The most important symptom of cerumen impaction is partial loss of hearing. Other symptoms are itching, tinnitus (noise or ringing in the ears), a sensation of fullness in the ear, and pain.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of impacted cerumen is usually made by examining the ear canal and eardrum with an otoscope, an instrument with a light attached that allows the doctor to look into the canal.

Prevention

The best method of cleaning the external ear is to wipe the outer opening with a damp washcloth folded over the index finger, without going into the ear canal itself. Two techniques have been recommended to prevent cerumen from reaccumulating in the ear. The patient may place two or three drops of mineral oil into each ear once a week, allow it to remain for two or three minutes, and rinse it out with warm water.