

**UNDERSTANDING CERUMEN:
THE ESSENTIALS OF EAR CANAL HEALTH**

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A HEARING ASSESSMENT CENTER PUBLICATION

BY DR. RORY CERNIK

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INTRODUCTION

By Dr. Rory Cernik, Au.D

Cerumen, commonly known as ear wax, is a natural substance produced by the ear to protect and lubricate the ear canal. While often overlooked, cerumen plays an important role in maintaining ear health. In this eBook, we will discuss cerumen, exploring its definition, significance, proper cleaning techniques, and when to seek professional assistance.



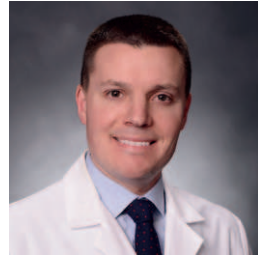
Definition and Significance of Cerumen

Cerumen is a waxy substance produced by specialized glands in the ear canal. It serves as a protective barrier, trapping dust, debris, and microorganisms that may otherwise harm the ear. Interestingly, the composition of cerumen can vary among individuals, with some having wet and sticky cerumen, while others produce a dry and flaky type. Statistics reveal that cerumen impaction, a condition where ear wax accumulates and causes discomfort, affects a significant number of people each year, emphasizing the importance of proper ear care. In our clinics, the prevalence of ear wax varies. Some have chronic wax build-up while others will rarely accumulate any wax in the ear.

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“Removing ear wax is a very common procedure. The chemistry and pH balance of ear wax changes as we age. Typically, when we are born our wax is acidic or moist. This wax migrates well out of the ear. As we age, ear wax turns more dry or dense. This type of wax tends to attach to the epidermis or top layer of skin. Improper removal of this wax can be painful.



Dr. Rory Cernik, Au.D.

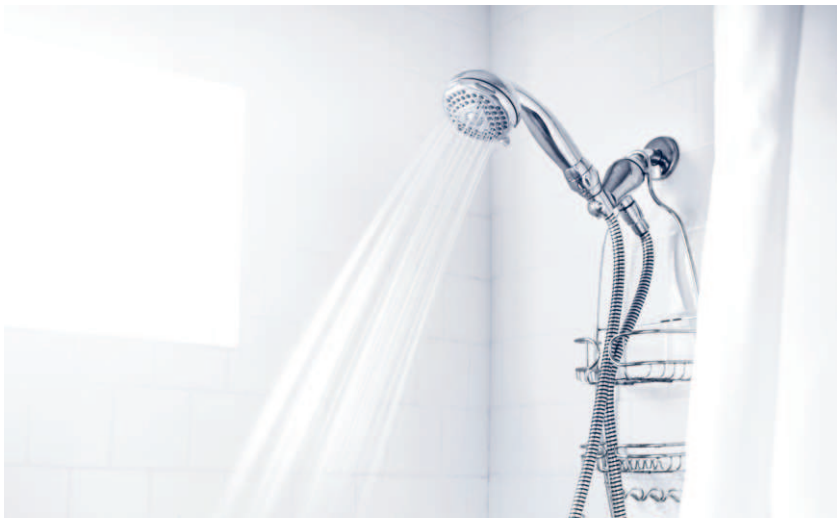
The ear canal has a bony portion, closer to the ear drum, and a cartilaginous portion, closer to the canal exit. Wax usually forms in or near the cartilaginous area. In a healthy canal, wax migrates, on its own, out of the canal at the same rate that our hair grows. When the wax no longer moves outward, it will need to be removed. In general, ear wax is a healthy sign of body chemistry. We need it!”



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Proper Cleaning Techniques

While cerumen is beneficial, an excess build-up can lead to discomfort, muffled hearing and even ear infections. Gentle home cleaning practices can help prevent excessive accumulation. It is very important to resist the urge to insert objects like cotton swabs or hairpins into the ear canal, as this can push wax deeper or risk injury. Instead, cleaning the outer ear with a damp cloth and allowing water to flow naturally during showers can promote healthy wax migration out of the ear. If there is no history of an eardrum hole, or perforation, we recommend that that our patients irrigate their ears in the shower. This is assuming they use a gentle spray. To dry, just use a tissue or towel on your index finger once out of the shower.



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WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE:

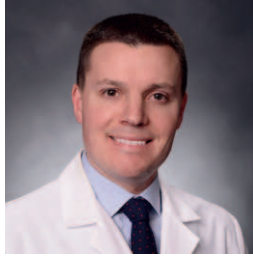
Cerumen impactions are common and will occur. If you experience symptoms such as sudden hearing loss, ear pain, persistent ringing, or a sensation of fullness in the ear, it's important to see a professional. A healthcare provider/audiologist can assess your condition and recommend appropriate steps. Additionally, individuals with a history of ear issues, ear surgeries, or a narrow ear canal should consider regular check-ups to monitor and manage cerumen accumulation.

CERUMEN MANAGEMENT IN A DOCTOR'S OFFICE:

Professional cerumen removal may be necessary and is a common procedure. In a doctor's office, various techniques can be employed based on the patient's condition. Specialized tools, such as curettes and forceps, can be used to carefully remove the wax. Micro suction, another technique, employs gentle suction to remove cerumen while minimizing the risk of injury. Here we essentially vacuum the ear wax. This should be done under an operating microscope or using a camera. Irrigation is usually avoided in our offices. The skin in the ear canal is very thin and sensitive. High-pressure water could very easily tear the skin, cause infection or make the patient dizzy.

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“I NEVER recommend that patients use q-tips or over the counter ear canal equipment. The ear canal is far too delicate for this. I also do not recommend self-prescribing soften agents such as debrox. These drops irritate certain types of skin. I will sometimes recommend using a softening agent for a few days, only if the patient has a risk of excessive bleeding. Removing ear wax should be mainly discomfort free. Bleeding should never occur!”



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THE PROCEDURE

During a cerumen removal procedure, a healthcare provider will first examine the ear canal using an otoscope, camera or microscope. This allows them to assess the extent of wax accumulation and determine the most appropriate method for removal. Upon consent the wax will be removed. Again, this will be done using manual tools and/or a vacuum.

AFTERCARE AND PRECAUTIONS:

After cerumen removal, it's important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions for aftercare. They may recommend using ear drops to prevent dryness or infection and advise against inserting any objects into the ear. Protecting your ears from excessive moisture, like while swimming or showering, can also prevent future wax accumulation. Regular follow-up appointments may be recommended, especially for individuals prone to cerumen impaction. Your audiologist will recommend an appropriate maintenance schedule.



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Preventing Future Issues

While cerumen removal in a doctor's office can provide relief, adopting preventive measures can reduce the likelihood of recurrence. Practicing good ear hygiene by avoiding excessive cleaning and refraining from inserting objects into the ear is key.



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