



York and Scarborough
Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

The removal of troublesome earwax by microsuction

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

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What is wax and what does impaction mean?

Earwax or cerumen, as it is also known, is made inside the ear canal. This yellowish/brown waxy substance is a combination of naturally produced oils and dry skin that builds up in the ear. The wax lubricates the ear canal and is generally self-cleaning. It is completely normal to have wax in your ears and everyone produces it. Wax can provide protection for your ears from bacteria, fungus, insects, foreign bodies and water.

Some people have skin conditions, such as eczema, which can also cause more wax to build up in the ear canal and cause problems. Others produce more wax than others and might have narrow or hairier ears, which causes it to build up quicker or more frequently than others. The wax can then become impacted, meaning that it is dry and hard which causes it to get stuck in the ear canal.

What are the signs of wax impaction?

Common signs of impacted wax include a feeling of fullness in the ear, pain and ringing sounds. If the wax is not removed and continues to build up, it can then cause hearing loss. It is important that this built-up ear wax is removed, and this is done by microsuction in our hospitals.

What is microsuction?

Microsuction is used to remove excess or impacted wax from your ears, while you are laid on a treatment couch in a treatment room, here in clinic. A small suction device is placed into the ear canal. Any excess wax that we see when looking down the ear canal through a microscope is suctioned out.

Microsuction is the safest way to remove wax without using water or pressure. The ear and the eardrum are viewed clearly during the procedure and the doctor or nurse can assess the health and condition of your ears. They will explain each step of the procedure at your appointment and will answer any questions you might have.

Individuals with hearing aids are more likely to have impacted wax. There are also some ear conditions that require regular microsuction, such as recurrent ear infections, previous surgery or some ear disorders. This procedure helps keep the ear dry and free of clogging wax.

What will microsuction feel like?

Most people tolerate microsuction very well. Some may be more sensitive to the noise of the suction than others. A thinner suction device can be used to reduce the sound and volume of noise if this is needed. The sound is of rushing air and it can feel like a cool sensation in the ear canal. This is relaxing for some, where others find it unsettling.

Some people find that they may cough while having the procedure. This is due to a nerve sometimes being sensitised causing a coughing reflex.

In a few cases, microsuction can cause pain or mild discomfort. We can stop the procedure at any point to minimise any discomfort you may feel. There may sometimes be some irritation of the ear, minor or temporary hearing changes or some bleeding, but this usually resolves very quickly.

How often will I need to come for microsuction?

Some people produce more wax than others, so they need their wax removing regularly. The doctor or nurse will assess your ears and the amount of wax in them, and this will determine when, or if, you need to come again. Some people only need one visit and will be discharged, where others will need to come again.

How do I look after my ears in the future?

When swimming, showering or washing your hair, we recommend placing half a cotton wool ball coated in Vaseline in the entrance of each ear. Silicone ear plugs can be worn too, but these need to be cleaned and dried after each use.

Patients should not use olive oil or wax softeners unless we have told you to do so. Using these products without our advice can cause the wax to become too wet to remove, as well as lead to fungal infections.

The use of cotton tipped swabs is not advised, as this pushes the wax further down into the ear. The use of these can also irritate sensitive skin within the ear canal.

The use of ear buds or small earphones that sit inside the entrance to the ear canal is also not advisable. Please use headphones instead and make sure these are not on too high a volume to protect your hearing.

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

Nursing staff, Head and Neck Outpatient department,
York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or
telephone 01904 721368.

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website:

www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/

Owner	Lucy Hind, Deputy Sister
Date first issued	September 2023
Review Date	December 2027
Version	2 (issued December 2024)
Approved by	Ear, Nose and Throat Department Surgery, Clinical Governance Group
Document Reference	PIL 1626 v2

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