

A close-up photograph of a doctor in a white lab coat examining a patient's ear. The doctor is on the left, leaning in, and holding a blue otoscope to the patient's ear. The patient is a woman with blonde hair, wearing a red top, and is looking down. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

9 Facts About Earwax

By Morgan Heinrich

It's 8 p.m. and you are going through your bedtime routine. You wash your face, brush your hair, brush your teeth, and grab a cotton swab to clean out your ears. But wait—drop that cotton swab! Believe it or not, that earwax you feel obligated to obliterate actually has a purpose.

Here are nine things you probably didn't know about earwax:

1. Earwax protects

Similar to eyelashes and nose hair, your earwax is a protective device that is often underappreciated. The primary purpose of earwax is to protect your ear canal and eardrum from foreign materials. These outside invaders include dust, bacteria, and other microorganisms. Without earwax, the ear canal would be more susceptible to infections that can irritate and inflame your ears.

2. Earwax is not actually wax

The scientific name for earwax is cerumen. Cerumen is a combination of sebum (which is essentially skin cells that have fallen off from inside of the ear), bits of hair, and secretions from the ceruminous glands in the outer ear canal.

3. Two types of earwax are based on genetics

The Monell Chemical Senses Center discovered that, like sweat, chemical compounds in earwax differ between races. There are two different types of earwax—wet and dry.

1. Dry earwax is usually crumbly and lighter in color, usually from tan to light-gray. People of Northeast Asian and Native American descent often have this type of earwax.
2. Wet earwax is sticky and yellow-to-brown in color and can even have an odor. This earwax is normally found in people that are of European or African descent.

4. Earwax lubricates

Just like tears, earwax lubricates and therefore is beneficial to your ear canal. Without adequate amounts of earwax, your ears would be dry and itchy.

5. Earwax self-cleans

Your earwax actually cleans up after itself! Whenever you chew or move your jaw, you help keep your earwax churning slowly from the eardrum to the ear opening, where it either will dry up, flake off, or fall out at its own pace.

6. Cotton swabs are harmful

As mentioned earlier, do not use a cotton swab to clean out your ears. Since your ears have the ability to self-clean, you should never try to stick anything into them. Therefore, keep these swabs and any other objects—including your fingers—out of your ears. Every time you put something inside your ear, either to scratch an itch or attempt to remove earwax, you actually risk pushing the wax further into your ear where it can become blocked.

7. Ear candling is also harmful

If cotton swabs are bad for your ears, does burning a candle inside your ear sound like a better solution? No!

During ear candling, a person will lie on their side while a long cone-shaped candle is nestled just inside of their ear canal. The candle is then lit in an attempt to soften and suction out the earwax. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warns that ear candling has no proven benefits. But it is proven that these candles can cause burns, wax blockage, and punctured eardrums.

8. Earwax affects your hearing

Every time you shove a cotton swab, earplugs, music earbuds, or even hearing aids into your ear, you risk pushing the earwax farther and farther into the ear canal. These items that are regularly placed into the ear can actually increase earwax buildup because they inhibit the natural migration of earwax out of the ear canal.

Blocked earwax is the most common cause of hearing loss. This can happen when wax is pushed back toward the eardrum or if the ears produce more wax than needed.

9. Stress and fear can affect your ears

Stress or fear can actually increase your earwax production. The glands in the ear that assist secreting wax are called the apocrine glands. These glands are the same ones that are responsible for your smelliest sweat!

Just as stress can make you sweat more (and smell worse), stress and other emotional responses (like fear) can also increase your earwax production. **HLM**

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