

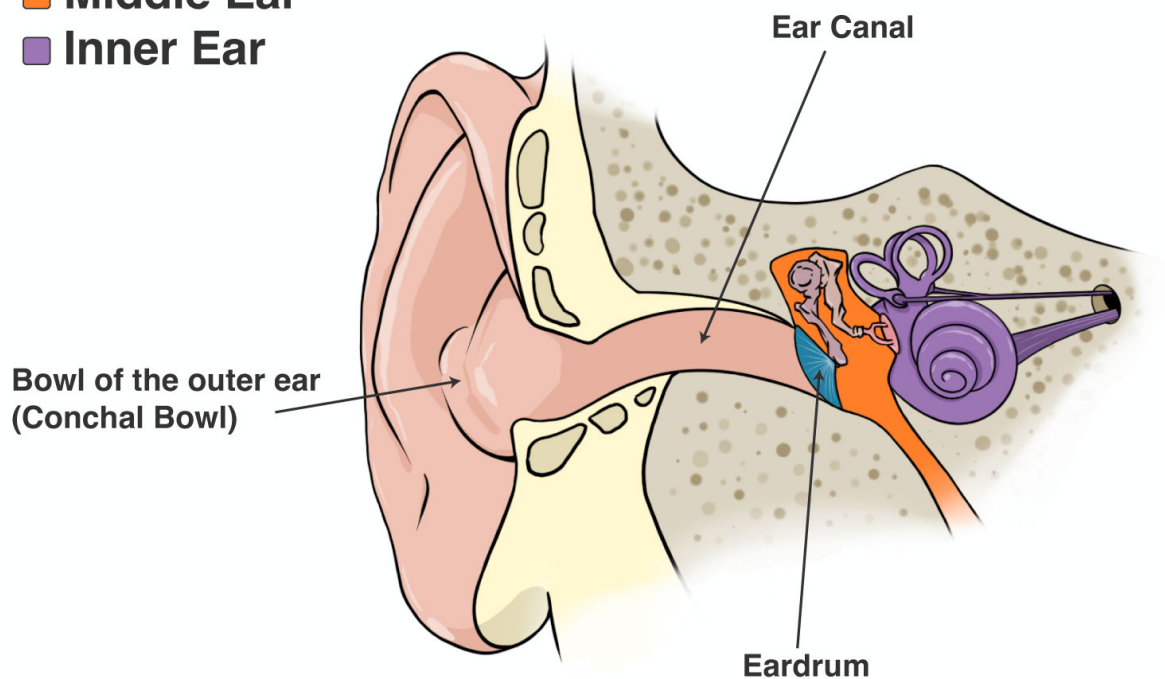


Self-help tips: itchy ears and earwax build-up

How does the ear work?

The ear is made up of the outer, middle and inner ear. Sound travels through the outer ear and reaches the eardrum, causing it to vibrate. The vibration is transmitted through three tiny bones in the middle ear. The vibration then enters the inner ear, where nerve cells produce signals that are carried to the brain, where they are interpreted as sound. See figure 1 for the anatomy of the ear.

- Outer Ear
- Middle Ear
- Inner Ear



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Should I clean my ears?

No. The ear canals are self-cleaning.

Wax is made in the ear canal. Wax protects your ear canals. The skin of your ear canal works like a conveyor belt. It takes wax and skin cells from the eardrum to the outer part of the ear canal. You only have to clean the bowl of the outer ear.

Cotton buds or using your little fingers to remove earwax or clean the ear canals can disrupt this conveyor belt and push the wax deeper into the ear canal. These can also damage the skin of the ear canal and allow the bacteria that naturally coat our skin to get into the damaged skin and cause an [infection](#).

Should I keep my ears dry?

Water inside the ear canals, especially shampoo or bath water or even swimming pool water, makes you prone to outer ear infections.

You can prevent water from getting into your ears by using a ball of cotton wool covered in Vaseline (petroleum jelly) when you are in the shower or bath. This is placed in the ball of the outer ear and should not be pushed into the ear canal. After your shower or bath, throw the cotton wool plug away and use a fresh one for your next shower or bath.

Some people prefer to use earplugs which can be purchased over the counter. Please make sure that you clean the earplugs between uses.

Keeping your ears dry does not mean that you should not take recommended ear drops or sprays.

Self-care for earwax

In some people, the ear canals are naturally narrower, or they might have had previous surgery to the ears or for some reason, the ear canal conveyor belt does not work very well. This may cause a build-up of wax in the ears.

There are multiple over-the-counter eardrops you can buy to soften earwax. We would recommend using olive oil drops which you can buy over the counter from any pharmacy. It is the same olive oil used to cook, so this can be used as well, with a dropper. Use 2 to 3 drops at normal body temperature (hold the bottle in your hand for a few minutes) once a week or more often, if needed. This should soften the earwax and make it come out by itself.

If the wax is very hard, it may be preferable to use sodium bicarbonate drops which can be bought from your local pharmacy. Sodium bicarbonate drops should only be used for 7 to 10 days. Remember to check with your doctor before using such drops if you have previously been told you have a hole in the eardrum as it may cause discomfort or be painful.

If you are wearing hearing aids, it may be best to use sodium bicarbonate drops as olive oil can block your hearing aid.

For a step-by-step guide on how to put drops in your ears, please visit the following [webpage](#).

Self-care for itchy ears

Sometimes the ears get a little bit itchy for no specific reason. Sometimes it could be because you have accidentally allowed some shampoo water in the ear canal, and this can irritate the ear canal skin.

Avoid scratching your ears and do not use cotton buds or anything else in your ear canals.

Over-the-counter sprays such as Ear Calm spray may help. It is a mild vinegar solution which can help restore the natural acidity of your ear canals. This can help reduce the risk of an outer ear infection. Remember not to use such sprays if you have previously been told you have a hole in the eardrum as it may cause discomfort or be painful.

If the itching persists, then it would be important to have your ear examined by your doctor to rule out an infection. Skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis, if they affect the outer ears, can also cause itchiness.

Disclaimer: *This publication is designed for the information of patients. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the information contained may not be comprehensive and patients should not act upon it without seeking professional advice.*

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