Why, exactly, shouldn't I stick cotton swabs in my ears? [1]

Dear Alice,

How often should I clean my ears? Is daily too much?

?Dumbo

Answer

Dear Dumbo,

Feel free to clean the external part of your ears whenever you shower or bathe, but try to resist the urge to go ear-spelunking. Earwax may seem gross, but this sticky substance actually keeps your ears healthy. Trying to dig out earwax usually does more harm than good.

Glands in the outer portion of the ear canal produce cerumen or earwax, which acts as a protective coating and gives water and infections the slip. Regular chewing and jaw jabbering encourages wax to migrate to the ear opening, sweeping away dead skin cells and germs along the way. At the end of the ear canal, wax dries and falls out of the ear. Trying to remove wax with cotton swabs (e.g. Q-tips®) or twisted paper towels can disrupt the natural cleaning process by pushing wax further into the ear. By inserting any objects into your ear, you also risk scratching the ear canal, introducing germs, and puncturing your eardrum.

If you must remove earwax, steer clear of pointed objects and ear candles. Try a hot shower to melt and flush out earwax, and then wipe wax off the outer ear with a washcloth. An over-the-counter wax softener, mineral oil, glycerin, or hydrogen peroxide may also help dissolve wax. No more than once a week, put a few drops of the product in each ear, wait about 15 minutes, and then lie down on a towel to let the drops and wax drain out. You can also flush the ear canal gently with warm water and a bulb syringe. There are a lot of nerve endings in the ear so cleaning can feel oh-so-good, just be careful not to go overboard. Clearing out too much wax can leave your ears feeling dry and itchy, starting a vicious cycle of excess cleaning and irritation.

Rarely, an excess amount of earwax does build up, blocking the eardrum. Visit a health care provider for a check-up and a professional cleaning if you notice the following symptoms:

- Earache, fullness in the ear, or clogged feeling
- Partial hearing loss
- Tinnitus, ringing, or noises in the ear
• Itching, odor, or discharge
• Coughing

List adapted from the article Earwax [2] from the American Academy of Otolaryngology.

If you're prone to wax blockage, wear a hearing aid, or have a damaged eardrum it's best to let a health professional tackle any wax removal.

It's tempting to try and fish out unwanted earwax, but your inner ear actually does a pretty good job of keeping itself clean. Too bad the dishes won't clean themselves too!

Alice!

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