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"In elderly patients, it’s one of the most common reasons people present for hearing-related problems," said York, whose clients now include 10 local centers. "About 3 in 5 people may have some degree of impaction and most are completely impacted."

Julie Brown, assistant director of nursing in the memory support unit at SilverRidge Assisted Living in Gretna, Nebraska, said impacted earwax can be a particular problem for patients with dementia. It exacerbates hearing loss, which can impede communication and worsen aggression and other difficult behaviors. "As soon as the earwax is cleared up, even their behavior has calmed down," Brown said.

Excessive earwax sends about 12 million people to see health workers every year, including about 8 million who require wax removal, according to the otolaryngology association. Hearing-aid users should have regular ear checks every three to six months, the guidelines suggest. People with dementia also should have earwax removed regularly.

WHEN AND HOW SHOULD THE EARS BE CLEANED?

Earwax may be the most insidious. Don’t laugh. That greasy, often gross, buildup occurs more in older ears than those of the young, experts say. And when it goes unrecognized, it can pose serious problems, especially for the 2.2 million people who live in U.S. nursing homes and assisted living centers.

"The excessive amount of earwax can cause hearing loss or ringing in your ears," said Jackie Clark, a board-certified audiologist who is president of the American Academy of Audiology. "Right now, we see some correlation between hearing loss and cognitive decline."

Earwax — which is not really wax at all, but a substance called cerumen that canals block the ear canal 15 to 30 minutes are put in the ear canal. Most cases of earwax blockage respond to home treatments such as detergent drops or carbamide peroxide (available in most pharmacies) may also aid in the removal of wax.

Irrigation or ear syringing is commonly used for cleaning and can be performed by a physician or at home using a commercially available irrigation kit. Ear syringing is most effective when water, saline, or wax dissolving drops are put in the ear canal for 30 minutes before treatment. - American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery

Earwax buildup, blockage in ears poses unrecognizable risk in long-term care

By JoNel Aleccia
Kaiser Health News

Ears should be cleaned when enough earwax accumulates to cause one or more of the following symptoms:
- Earache, fullness in the ear, or a sensation the ear is plugged
- Partial hearing loss, which may be progressive
- Tinnitus, ringing, or noises in the ear
- Itching, odor, or discharge
- Coughing

To clean the ears, wash the external ear with a cloth, but do not insert anything into the ear canal. Most cases of ear wax blockage respond to home treatments such as detergent drops or carbamide peroxide (available in most pharmacies) may also aid in the removal of wax.

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