

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Earwax and the elderly

Buildup, blockage in ears poses unrecognizable risk in long-term care

By JoNel Aleccia
Kaiser Health News

Of all the indignities that come with aging, excessive earwax may be the most insidious.

Don't laugh. That greasy, often gross, buildup occurs more often in older ears than those of the young, experts say. And when it goes unrecognised, 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. Some people experience vertigo, which increases the risk of falling," 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 binds with dirt, dust and debris — is normally produced by the body as a way to clean and protect the ears. In most people, the self-cleaning process works fine.

But in others — including about 10 percent of young children, 20 percent of adults and more than 30 percent of elderly and developmentally disabled people — the wax collects to the point where it can completely block the ear canal.

Up to two-thirds of people in nursing homes may suffer from that condition, known as impaction, according to 2017 guidelines for removal of impacted earwax issued by the American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Foundation.

In 2016, federal Medicare recipients logged

WHEN AND HOW SHOULD THE EARS BE CLEANED?

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 placing a few drops of mineral oil, baby oil, glycerin, or commercial drops in the ear. Detergent drops such as hydrogen peroxide 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 15 to 30 minutes before treatment.

— American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery

nearly 1.7 million earwax removal services at a cost of more than \$51 million, according to payment records analyzed by Kaiser Health News.

"In elderly patients, it's fairly common," said Dr. Seth Schwartz, a Seattle otolaryngologist who led the most recent update of the guidelines. "It seems like such a basic thing, but



Janie York examines the ear of Elaine Martin in Gretna, Nebraska. Martin had quite a bit of earwax before getting her ears cleaned by York and getting hearing aids.

[Chris Machian for KHN]

it's one of the most common reasons people present for hearing-related problems."

It's so bad that Janie York, of Omaha, Nebraska, started Hear Now mobile hearing solutions, one of a growing number of businesses devoted to cleaning hearing aids and checking the ears of elderly people living in residential care settings.

"It's epidemic," said York, whose clients now include 10 local centers. "About 3 in 5 people I see 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 should also have earwax removed regularly.

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