

Microsuction – aural care

Audiology

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01271 314090 or at rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net.

Pre-appointment preparation

To prepare for removal of excess wax by syringing or microsuction, or to encourage normal expulsion of wax from the outer ear:

- Purchase olive oil spray from chemist/pharmacy, for example Earol.
- Apply a single spray of oil to the affected ear.
- Repeat the procedure with the opposite ear if you also have excess wax this side.
- Do this morning and night for 5 – 7 days prior to your appointment.
- Eardrops are not suitable if you have a perforated ear drum.
- If you experience increasing pain, irritation or discharge, contact your doctor.

What is microsuction?

Microsuction is a procedure carried about by an audiologist or specialist nurse to remove wax, debris and foreign objects from your outer ear.

It is performed with the use of a microscope, to allow for good visualisation, and a suction tube (a small Hoover), which removes the wax and debris from the ear canal. Instruments may also be used to remove more solid objects, such as foreign bodies or hard wax.

Why do I need microsuction?

Whilst wax is a normal component of a healthy ear providing lubrication and acting as an antibacterial, the natural evacuation of it can be interrupted and cause a build-up. This can be a result of narrowing or collapsing of the ear canal. Infections or insertion of items such as cotton buds can contribute to the accumulation of wax which then needs to be removed.

Microsuction is used as an alternative to irrigation (syringing), where water is inserted into the ear using a pump and “washes” the ear wax or debris out of the ear. There are many reasons why people may need to have microsuction as an alternative and these include:

- Issues with irrigation previously
- Evidence of a middle ear infection in the last 6 weeks
- Any form of ear surgery – with the exception of grommets that have fallen out or been removed 18 months prior.
- A perforation in the tympanic membrane, also known as the ear drum, or a history of mucosal discharge from the middle ear in the last 12 months
- Any history of a cleft palate; even if this has been repaired
- Otitis externa (ear canal infection), which is painful
- Tinnitus, as having irrigation can worsen tinnitus
- A healed perforation may be considered too weak to have irrigation
- A history of problematic dizziness, as irrigation could irritate this

Possible side effects of treatment

Whilst microsuction has many benefits in comparison to irrigation, it does have some side effects. These include:

- Dizziness

Temporary dizziness can be a result of the temperature of the ear changing due to wax removal. It does not last long.

- Infection

This is rare and there is only a small risk. All of the instruments are single use and discarded after each procedure, reducing the risk even further. In the unfortunate event it does occur, there are topical treatments (medication applied to the skin or mucous membranes such as cream) which are very effective at resolving any infections.

- Trauma

As the procedure requires a small metal tube being inserted into the ear canal, there is a risk of trauma occurring in the ear canal or to the ear drum. This can be a result of very hard wax or as a result of movement during the procedure. The practitioners are trained specifically for this procedure to help reduce the risk further.

What will it feel like?

Microsuction is known to be noisy due to the Hoover attaching itself to the wax, whilst this noise can be irritating, it is not loud enough to cause permanent damage to your hearing. If at any point it is too much, the procedure can be paused to give you a break.

Some discomfort can be felt if the wax is a large plug or if it is hard, however if it ever becomes painful, it will be stopped immediately and reassessed.

Whilst some strange sensations may be felt, such as itching or dizziness, microsuction has been found to provide almost immediate relief to many patients.

Ear care at home

By caring for your ears properly at home, you can help to reduce the risk of infections, help with the removal of wax at your appointment and reduce the likelihood of impactions (build-up of earwax). There are many ways you can help care for your ears at home and these include:

- Not inserting any foreign bodies into your ears – such as hair grips, cotton buds or your fingers. The ear has a natural process to eliminate dead skin and wax; by inserting objects into your ear (to clean, for example), it is pushing the wax back and causing trauma and impaction.
- Only clean the exterior part of your ear using a wet wipe or damp cloth
- Allow your ear to dry naturally
- If your ears are painful or itchy and you think you are suffering from an ear infection, take water precautions when bathing to prevent water entering the ear – water precautions include a dry piece of cotton wool at the entrance of the ear canal and Vaseline over the top to produce a water proof barrier. Do NOT push the cotton wool into the ear canal.
- Keep your ears dry when swimming with the use of a swimming hat or headband and swim plugs
- Keep hearing aids clean – wash them with antibacterial wipes or soap and water when taking them out – do not soak them overnight.
- On the advice of the audiologist or nurse specialist only, using olive oil ear spray can help to keep the wax soft and to moisturise the ear should you suffer from dry skin.

Follow up

If this is your first appointment and have never had any issues with wax in the past, it could be that you will be discharged from Aural Care Clinic straight after the microsuction. If you need further treatment in the future, please ask your GP for re-referral.

If you have any of the issues with irrigation and have an ongoing wax build-up problem, you may be given an open appointment. This means that when you feel the wax is becoming an issue, you can contact the Audiology department to book a microsuction appointment. This gives you control over your own care. There is approximately a 4 week wait, therefore do not wait until you are entirely blocked.

Further information

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References

<https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2015/october/ear-wax-management/>

<http://www.earcarecentre.com/uploadedFiles/Pages/Patients/Leaflets/Microsuction.pdf>

<https://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/resources/patient-information/ent/microsuction.pdf>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/earwax-build-up/>

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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