

Ask the audiologist

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When should I get my hearing tested?

Because hearing loss does not hurt and occurs very slowly over time, I recommend a baseline hearing test by age 50. If you have had significant noise exposure, this recommendation goes down to age 40. The first people to notice that someone has hearing loss are always friends, family or co-workers. This makes sense because if you cannot hear something, there is no way to know you did not hear it unless someone tells you. In addition, at any time, if a sudden change is noticed in your hearing, you should have your hearing tested immediately. Some sudden changes can only be treated through medication that a physician can prescribe. For sudden hearing loss due to infection, quick treatment is imperative.



Don't you have to be older to have hearing loss?

Hearing loss can and does happen at any age, and patients of all ages can be tested. In fact, in Wisconsin, it is mandated that babies are screened as newborns. Testing is painless and easy. If you are concerned about your ability to hear or have a strong family history of hearing loss, have your hearing tested. This will give you the information you need to understand your amplification choices.

Can I use my cell phone while I'm wearing hearing aids?

All of the major hearing device manufacturers have developed technology to make hearing aids compatible with cell phones. Some have a direct connection between certain kinds of cell phones and hearing aids, while others require a wireless Bluetooth adaptor to connect the two. Another common difficulty that uses similar technology is television watching. There are many assistive devices for the TV. Some work with hearing aids but others can work independently.

What is ear wax?

No one really knows why we have ear wax, but there are some theories. For example, wax is thought to be part of the ear's natural cleaning process. Wax is normal and is also called cerumen. Wax is made in the outer portion of the ear canal by special cells. Each day, wax is slowly made and slowly dries up and falls out of the canal without being noticed. This process removes dust or small particles that may have entered the canal. The color and consistency of the wax can vary from person to person, being dark or light, runny or dry and flaky. When there is not enough earwax produced, people's ear canals feel dry and itchy.

Can I use cotton swabs?

A cotton swab should not be used to remove ear wax unless it is visible on the outer edge of the ear canal. The truth is that often when using cotton swabs, some wax is removed but more wax can be pushed deeper into the ear canal. In addition, drying out the ear canal stimulates the ear to make more wax.

The ear drum itself is only three cell layers thick. I have personally met patients who have damaged their ear drums with cotton swabs. Not only does it hurt, it may also require surgery to repair the ear drum and any damage done to the three tiny bones behind the eardrum.

How much is too much wax?

Some people are prone to blockage of ear wax which can dramatically decrease hearing, cause tinnitus (ringing in the ears), itchy ears or a plugged feeling. For those who wear hearing aids, this is more likely to happen as the aid blocks the normal process of wax falling out from occurring. If you are prone to ear wax, it is important to have your physician or audiologist check your ears at each visit to keep the ears from being blocked. Your hearing health provider can tell you if there is a normal amount of wax or if the wax should be removed. Remember, the normal ear canal does have some wax!

How should ear wax be removed?

Many people are successful in removing their ear wax at home on their own as long as they are certain there is not perforation in the eardrum. Using over-the-counter drops such as Debrox or a small dab of mineral oil or olive oil to soften the wax can be helpful. If the wax is stubborn and needs to be removed by a physician or audiologist, this can be done with a curette and suction or with a warm water flush.