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BIRMINGHAM & DISTRICT TINNITUS GROUP
presenting a variety of points to offer information and support for our members

Ear Care

by Ann Perry B&DTG

The BBC website carries an article - by Dr Trisha Macnair - on obsessive ear cleaning and the risks of infection or hearing loss. This compounds the basic advice we have always given on general ear care and what to do if you have problem ears. In this updated occasional paper we present Dr Macnair's words as a good medical introduction to our previous guidance :-

"The skin of the outer ear canal and the eardrum is very thin and delicate and easily damaged. Any small scratch, especially if a sharp object is being used, will allow bacteria into the deeper tissues with the risk of infection. Even if the surface of the skin isn't broken, constant poking will irritate and inflame the skin.

Objects such as a hairgrips, if long enough, could also pierce the eardrum, which is exquisitely painful and again risks infection and the potential for permanent hearing damage.

Neither is it good to push wax around the ear a lot. Earwax is produced by special glands in the skin in the outer part of the ear canal. It's then supposed to stay in this outer part to catch dirt or dust and other small particles such as seaside sand to stop them from reaching the eardrum.

Wax is slowly moved naturally by the ear (as the skin cells move outwards from the drum) to the outer part of the ear where it rapidly becomes dry and breaks off, falling out of the ear to be replaced by fresh wax.

Earwax isn't meant to be removed by you - your body does that for you. Neither is wax meant to be pushed deeper down into the ear canal. People who continually clean their ears with a cotton buds risk pushing wax down onto the drum where it gets stuck, requiring ear drops and treatment to remove it."

We summarise this information in our basic rules for general ear care and problem ears as follows :-

On general ear care

- Rule number one is : Never put anything smaller than your elbow in your ear !
- Do not scratch your ears as this may spread infection.
- Ears should never be poked with anything which might cause damage to the delicate lining of your ear canal or - worse still - even perforate your ear drum.
- Remember that your ears have a 'self-cleaning' mechanism. Do not put anything in your ears without first seeking advice.
- Do not use cotton buds as these can compact wax.
- If you suffer excessive wax, olive oil (or almond oil) may help the ear to clean itself, but always seek advice and guidance from your GP or practice nurse.
- Avoid spraying anything into your ears i.e. hair lacquer or any other cosmetic preparations.
- Always protect against - and preferably avoid being exposed to - loud noise.

If you have problem ears

- Always keep your ears dry when showering, washing your hair and swimming. This can be done by using ear plugs (or cotton wool covered in Vaseline to make it waterproof) in the outer part of your ear. Before going swimming, check with your GP or nurse that it will not harm your ears.
- If ear wax becomes compacted and needs to be removed, be aware that syringing has been known to exacerbate tinnitus, so discuss the method used in your practice before treatment commences.
- When out of doors, protect against the cold and wind. Wear a scarf and keep your coat collar turned up.
- If your symptoms do not improve with treatment, or if they get worse, always consult your doctor.