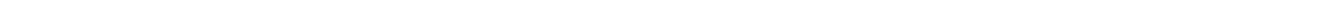


Q&A: Itch and Ringing in Ears

Consults from the Department of Otorhinolaryngology at TTSH answer questions about the itch and ringing in your ears.





(Best Not To) Play It By Ear

Question: There has been an itch in my left ear for a few months now. The itch comes and goes, and I have been told there could be an insect lodged inside my ear. But I don't feel like there is anything inside it.

Answer: The most common reason for an itch in the ear is the presence of either earwax or a foreign body in the ear canal. These foreign bodies can be anything from strands of hair after a haircut to the ends of cotton buds that become lodged during ear-cleaning.

Healthy ears produce earwax — it is the ear's way of ridding itself of dead skin cells that have accumulated within the ear canal. Earwax also contains an oily substance secreted by the skin of the ear canal. This oily substance helps 'debris' in the ear canal to travel outwards. Left alone, earwax should drop out of your ear naturally over time.

Many people clean their ears with cotton buds. In doing so, they may push the earwax deeper into their ear canals. Irritation can then occur should the earwax touch the eardrum. Self-cleaning may also lead to an ear infection, which can be perceived as an itch.

Unfortunately, just like itching elsewhere on the body, scratching the ear canals with different 'tools' may exacerbate the feeling. If you have an underlying skin condition like eczema or psoriasis, the skin in your ear canal may also flare up due to the condition. See a doctor if the itch persists.

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A Noisy Nuisance

I have been experiencing ringing noises in my ears for a while now. They come and go but do not cause physical discomfort. Recently, I saw a movie in which a character suffers from a condition called “tinnitus”. To alleviate his condition, he listens to music through earphones. What causes tinnitus and can listening to music really help with my condition?

Tinnitus is the term used to describe the perception of noise that is not from an external source. The noise is usually only heard by the affected individual and is known as subjective tinnitus. Occasionally, another person may also hear the sound — this is called objective

tinnitus.

The causes of objective tinnitus include the involuntary contraction of certain muscles in the ear or in the back of the nose — often perceived as a clicking noise. Another cause is the abnormal blood flow close to the affected ear; this is perceived as a whooshing or pulsating sound.

However, the vast majority of tinnitus is actually subjective and is frequently described by patient as constant “eee” and “ooo” sounds. The sound can also be described as a ringing or a cricket chirp by some patients. The presence of subjective tinnitus may indicate some dysfunction of the cochlea (the ‘hearing’ part of the inner ear) but not all patients have a measureable hearing loss when clinically assessed.

Many patients only perceive tinnitus when they are in a quiet environment. Having background music can help to ‘mask’ the tinnitus. However, one needs to be careful of the volume of music through the headphones. If too loud, it can result in further damage to the cochlea, resulting in worsening tinnitus and hearing loss.

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