



## Introduction

This is a summary of published evidence on the removal of earwax in primary care. It is produced by [EEvIT](#) and is a combination of different requests received from the ihub [Primary Care Improvement Portfolio](#) to inform their work on [Community Treatment and Care \(CTAC\) Services](#). It answers the following questions: what is the [recommended method of ear wax removal](#), and are there [examples of microsuction services in primary care](#) relevant to Scotland?

## Background

EEvIT recently supported the ihub [Primary Care Improvement Portfolio](#) with a [90 day learning cycle about CTAC services](#). Earwax removal was seen as a service that CTAC services could offer and therefore EEvIT was asked to look at the most appropriate method for earwax removal. Following on from this there has been further interest to learn from others and see how existing services operate. Some teams engaging with the ihub [Primary Care Improvement Portfolio](#) looking to redesign their services had specific questions about what primary care microsuction services are already set up.

Problems with earwax are a common health issue and earwax removal is the most commonly performed ENT procedure in primary care<sup>1</sup>.

## Recommended method of ear wax removal

The current national guideline was identified as the NICE guideline *Hearing loss in adults: assessment and management*<sup>2</sup>. The guideline has a section on earwax management that has recommendations for removing earwax in adults in primary care or community ear care services. It recommends offering to “remove earwax if the earwax is contributing to hearing loss or other symptoms, or needs to be removed in order to examine the ear or take an impression of the ear canal.”<sup>2</sup>

The guideline contains a consensus recommendation that removal of earwax should be performed “in a primary or community care setting, unless there are contraindications.”<sup>2</sup> The guideline recommends three methods but did not recommend one over another. The three options are “ear irrigation using an electronic irrigator, microsuction or another method of earwax removal (such as manual removal using a probe)”<sup>2</sup>. These are recommended if:

- “the practitioner (such as a community nurse or audiologist):
  - i. has training and expertise in using the method to remove earwax
  - ii. is aware of any contraindications to the method
- the correct equipment is available.”<sup>2</sup>

For ear irrigation the guideline recommends the use of pre-treatment wax softeners before initial treatment and again if irrigation is unsuccessful. If irrigation is unsuccessful after a second attempt the guideline recommends referral to a specialist service.

The guideline recommends not to offer manual ear syringing and to “advise adults not to remove earwax or clean their ears by inserting small objects, such as cotton buds, into the ear canal.”<sup>2</sup>

## Examples of microsuction in primary care

Two examples of microsuction services in primary care were found: one service in [NHS Tayside](#), and one in [Doncaster](#).

Three publications were found about a [new ear care service in NHS Tayside](#): two news items<sup>3,4</sup> and one patient information leaflet<sup>5</sup>. These publications describe the new service, how people can access the service, how to treat problematic ear wax, and what to expect from treatment.

A NHS England handbook about transforming elective ear, nose and throat (ENT) services<sup>6</sup> very briefly mentions a new [GP-based microsuction service in Doncaster](#).

### *NHS Tayside new ear care service*

#### *The service*

Two news items<sup>3,4</sup> promote the new ear care service in NHS Tayside which was launched in January 2019<sup>3</sup>. The ear care clinics are at six locations: Monifieth, Carnoustie, Arbroath, Montrose, Stracathro, and Forfar<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Referral*

The patient information leaflet<sup>5</sup> gives information about ear wax and the treatment available. It recommends the use of ear drops as an initial treatment and if they have been used for a week and symptoms continue the leaflet<sup>5</sup> says to book an appointment at one of NHS Tayside’s Aural Care Clinics. Phone numbers are given in all three publications<sup>3-5</sup> for patients to call to book an appointment. The new service removes the need to contact a GP or Practice Nurse<sup>5</sup>. Carnoustie Medical Group run their ear clinic fortnightly on a Wednesday afternoon and it is delivered by specialist nurses<sup>3</sup>.

#### *Treatment*

At the aural care clinic, a specialist nurse will examine the ears and suggest continuing with ear drops or carry out microsuction<sup>5</sup>. The leaflet<sup>5</sup> explains that anyone can have microsuction as long as they can remain still for the procedure. Information about microsuction provided by Carnoustie Medical Group explains that it has less risk of damage to the eardrum than syringing<sup>3</sup>. Following treatment at the ear clinic the nurse updates the patients’ GP about their treatment<sup>3</sup>.

### *Doncaster GP-based microsuction service*

Limited information was provided about this new GP-based microsuction service in Doncaster. It was introduced in October 2018 and 21 patients were referred in a two month period<sup>6</sup>. Eight patients had their earwax removed, five chose to have a hospital appointment instead, three were awaiting appointments, one went to be seen by another provider, and four did not attend their appointments<sup>6</sup>.

## Methodology

Two separate searches were conducted: one for the method of ear wax removal, and one for microsuction services.

### *Ear wax removal search methodology*

A search using the [NHS Scotland CLEAR](#) approach was carried out 11 December 2018 to identify the latest UK evidence for the removal of earwax. The search protocol is based on Haynes “4S” system<sup>7</sup> of finding best current evidence ranging from summaries to studies. The resources searched were: [SIGN guidelines](#), [NICE guidelines](#), [Clinical Knowledge Summaries](#), [Scottish Government Publications](#), [Healthcare Improvement Scotland Advice and Guidance](#).

### *Microsuction services search methodology*

We conducted a literature search for examples of microsuction services in primary care between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019. We searched key websites as well as the Cochrane Library, Medline, Epistemonikos and

Embase databases. Results were limited to English language. Search terms used included: cerumen, ear wax, microsuction, and primary care. A full list of resources searched and terms used are available on request.

## References

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