



Experiences of treatment for earwax in Brighton and Hove

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healthwatch
Brighton and Hove

Introduction

Over the last year (2023–2024) Healthwatch Brighton and Hove have received feedback about patients experiencing increasing challenges in obtaining treatment for ear wax removal. We have heard that it is getting harder to find a GP practice that will offer ear wax removal, and that patients with ear wax problems are increasingly having to turn to the private sector to access treatment.

We used a short survey designed by Healthwatch East Sussex, who had also received similar feedback around problems accessing treatment for ear wax removal. We extended this survey to hear from Brighton and Hove residents and identify areas where improvements could be made.

Background

Each year, around 2.3 million people in the UK need earwax treatment, according to the National Institute for Health and Care (NICE)¹. Ear wax build-up in the ear canal can cause painful symptoms including tinnitus, earache and hearing loss. Older people, people with learning disabilities and those who wear hearing aids are at increased risk of ear wax build up.

Ear wax removal used to be provided free on the NHS. However, in 2020, NHS guidelines changed, and ear wax removal is now considered a non-core service by the NHS, which means that GPs are not obligated to provide it.

In 2022, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) submitted Freedom of Information requests to all 42 Integrated Care Boards (ICB's) in England. ICB boards commission GP services. Of the 42 boards, 40 provided a response.

18 ICBs said they fully commission ear wax removal services in line with guidelines from NICE. NICE guidelines state that GP surgeries or community clinics should offer to remove earwax, if build-up is contributing to someone's hearing loss or causing other symptoms.

They found that 15 ICBs partially commission services, with the majority providing ear wax removal only within limited areas inside their geographical footprint. In some places where the service is commissioned, not all GP practices choose to deliver it. Some ICBs also have restrictive criteria which opposes NICE guidelines, such as only offering the service to people over 55². Another 7 ICBs do not commission any ear wax removal services.

Getting access to ear wax removal on the NHS is therefore becoming increasingly difficult. If the wax build up is linked to hearing loss, GPs can refer

¹ NICE (2018) *Hearing loss in adults: assessment and management*. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. <http://www.nice.org.uk> [Free Full-text]

² [Our ear wax removal campaign - RNID](#)

patients to audiology services. Patients are as a result having to turn to private practitioners and are having to pay for the service.

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove wanted to find out more about resident's experiences of trying to access treatment for ear wax.

Our survey

Between November 2024 and December 2024, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove ran a short survey asking people to share their experiences of seeking advice and or treatment for an ear wax problem in the last two years.

58 people responded to our survey. 58% of respondents were female and 43% were male³. 89% were from White British backgrounds, 2% were from a mixed background and 2% were from an Asian background. The age of respondents ranged from 16-97 with the average age being 64.

³ Percentages may not add up to 100% due to the rounding up or down of decimal points.

Summary

Our survey results show how significant the impact of an ear wax issue can be on a person's life. The results also reveal a mixed picture when it comes to finding information about, and then accessing ear wax removal through GP practices.

It is positive to hear that some local people manage to access ear wax removal on the NHS, and that for the majority of people the quality of their treatment once they receive it is good (whether they receive it through the NHS or private health providers).

However, we also heard that respondents are increasingly reporting that their GP practice no longer offers ear wax removal, and some people are having to resort to paying for treatment privately because they have no alternative.

Of most concern, are the people who are unable to access ear wax removal through the NHS and are also unable to afford private ear wax removal treatment.

In more detail, we heard:

- 44% of respondents said ear wax problems had a 'significant' or 'severe' impact on their lives.
- 56% of respondents were offered an appointment for ear wax removal at their GP. 44% were told their GP does not perform ear wax removal.
- Of those that were told their GP does not perform ear wax removal, 55% were not referred to any other services that offer ear wax removal. 45% were referred to private providers, pharmacies and opticians who offer audiology services.
- Of those who had an ear wax problem but who had not yet had ear wax treatment, 50% said they had not had treatment as they could not afford to pay privately.

Response to this report from NHS Sussex

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove invited a response from NHS Sussex to our findings. This is their response:



We welcome this report from Healthwatch, and thank them for their close work with patients, and for highlighting what an impact earwax and audiology services have on people's lives. We know there is more work to be done in this area of healthcare, and plan to help improve experience and services for patients.

We plan to implement the recommendations of this report, alongside other recommendations we have received about primary care audiology services, by working closely with GP practices and Primary Care Networks to improve knowledge of, and access to, audiology services among primary care staff and patients alike.



Results

The results to our survey will be presented across five themes:

1. Symptoms of ear wax build up & impact of ear wax issues
2. Getting information and support for ear wax build up
3. Experiences of getting treatment for ear wax
4. Cost of ear wax removal
5. Impact of not getting ear wax removal

Recommendations will then follow on from the results.

1. Symptoms of ear wax build up & impact of ear wax issues

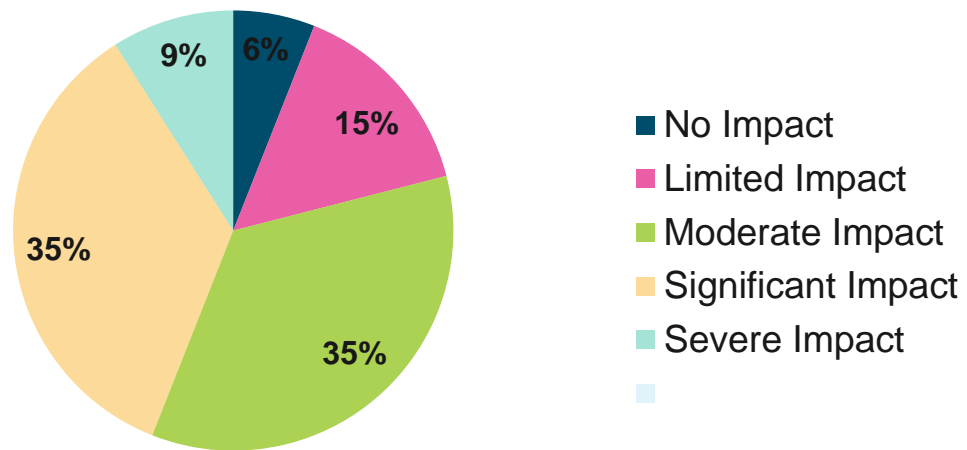
Our survey results show that the majority of respondents have had an ear wax problem for a significant period of time. 41% of respondents said they had had an ear wax problem for more than a year. 9% had an ear wax problem for between 7-12 months. 31% had an ear wax problem for 1-6 months. Only 12% had had an ear wax problem for less than a month.

Symptoms people experienced due to the build-up of ear wax included:

- Loss of hearing (77%)
- Ringing or popping in your ear (30%)
- Earache or pain (30%)
- A feeling of fullness in your ear (56%)
- Headaches (9%)
- Loss of balance (19%)
- Other - examples given include associated problems with hearing aids and the annoyance of only hearing in one ear (26%)

The pie chart below demonstrates the significant impact that ear wax problems had on our respondents' lives with over 70% saying it had a moderate to severe impact:

What Impact does/ did your ear wax problem have on your life?



These findings demonstrate the impact ear wax issues can have on people's lives. The quotes below, taken from comments at the end of the survey also illustrate how much disruption to people's lives ear wax build up can cause:

'I was very disappointed that my GP surgery would not remove my ear wax. [..]. I put up with the hearing loss and struggled in social events and avoided many situations because I couldn't hear'.

'I have previously had earwax removed at [XX] Surgery. They no longer perform this. It is something the NHS should provide as it impacts my health and life.'

'Not being able to hear in one ear really affects my everyday life as I work in a shop and am an aspiring musician'.

2. Getting information and support for ear wax build up

When asked 'where have you looked for information about how to get your ear wax removed?', the majority of our respondents (69%) looked to their GP practice for information. 22% looked at private providers for information, 22% turned to the internet and 19% looked at NHS websites. 11% spoke to friends or family and 11% looked to a pharmacy for information about ear wax removal. 59% of our respondents felt that 'information about ear wax removal' was easy to find,

The results from our survey around the quality of information found, again shows an inconsistent experience. 45% told us that they did not find that the information was 'helpful' and 53% told us that the information 'did not help them solve their ear wax issue'. 38% also told us that the information 'did not help them to understand what [their] options were'

The survey also demonstrates respondents' confusion around treatment the NHS provides. When asked 'Did you know that ear wax removal is a service the NHS provides for free?' 52% of respondents did not know that ear wax removal is a service the NHS provides for free whilst, 48% knew the NHS does provide it for free. This shows a real divided picture in knowledge of what treatment is available for ear wax removal on the NHS.

The quotes below help to demonstrate some of the confusion:

'[Getting ear wax removal] is very confused and frankly ridiculous, not even the specialists know what the offer is.'

'[I]only recently found out [ear wax removal] is usually free of charge on the NHS. The audiologist has never told us in the Deaf Community! It's like secrecy information.'

'I did think about contacting my GP but didn't bother as other people I spoke to told me they'd really struggled to get it done at their GP.'

'I am very disappointed in the poor service received by the [GP] surgery [regarding ear wax removal]. They should be informing patients correctly in the first instance and also should inform patients [...] on their website if they cannot offer this service.'

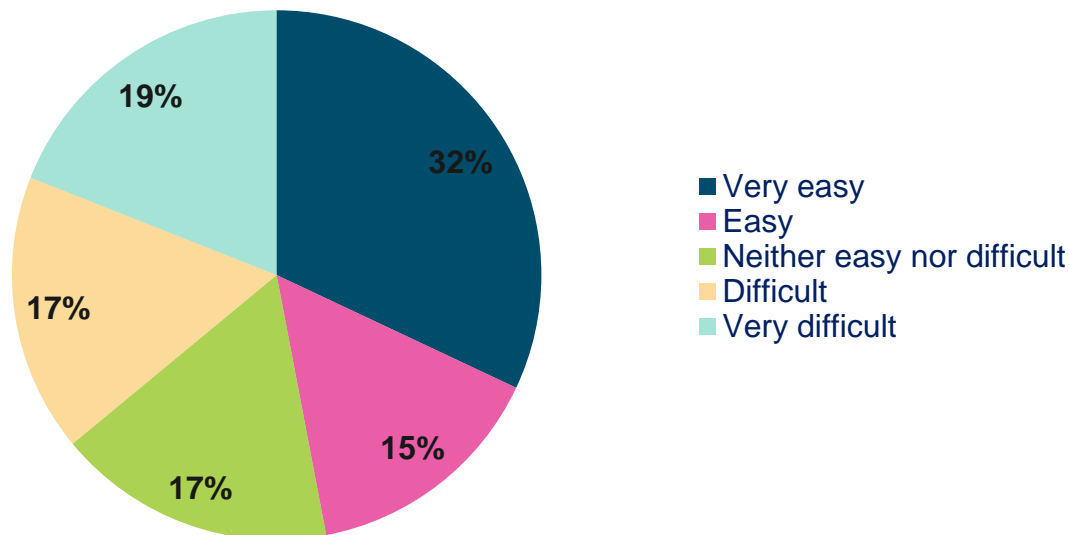
These results demonstrate a case for clearer information to be provided to patients on options and support for ear wax removal.

3. Experiences of getting treatment for ear wax

Getting an appointment for earwax removal

The survey results show that getting an appointment for ear wax removal is a mixed picture. 47% of respondents found it very easy or easy. 36% found it difficult or very difficult, as the pie chart below shows:

Overall, how easy was it to get an appointment for ear wax removal?



Of those that tried to get an appointment for ear wax removal at their GP, 56% were offered an appointment and 30% were told that their GP practice does not offer ear wax removal. The remaining 15% were told that their GP have reduced their sessions or no longer offer the service. One person eventually managed to get their ear wax removed at their medical centre but only on the second attempt when asking.

If respondents could not get an appointment for ear wax removal at their GP practice, we asked 'were you referred to another service that does offer ear wax removal?'. 55% told us they were not referred to another service, and 46% were referred to another service which included private health providers, opticians and pharmacies.



'My GP doesn't currently provide this service, and they haven't told me where I can get ear wax removal on the NHS for free'.

'I was told that ear wax removal was no longer offered at my local GP centre and told to try SpecSavers Audiology.'

'I was told to go to Specsavers to syringe my ears. Specsavers said the surgery should do it. Took ages until I had a moan then checked by nurse and then done, but only as a favour.'



Satisfaction with treatment

The speed however, at which our respondents managed to get an appointment was generally positive. 58% had to wait less than a month for an appointment. 17% waited between 1 month and 6 months, However, 24% had to wait more than 6 months.

The open comments show that some respondents were generally pleased with the treatment they received, be it though the NHS or through private providers:



'100% satisfaction with [XXX] surgery.'

'Contacted [private provider] and got an appointment within a few days. Excellent service and communication. Fully informed and shown scan of inner ear. Scan Sent in an email the day after the appointment and had a phone call the day after the appointment. Excellent service for £50''

'I went to Sussex Audiology who are experts and [Staff members name] was brilliant.'

'Doctor checked me out then nurse performed the procedure. Very comfortable and effective. I've had it done previously, some time ago.'



Types of ear wax removal offered

In our research we heard about a range of experiences of the three main methods of professional ear wax removal – syringing, ear irrigation and microsuction. Respondents overwhelmingly expressed preferences for microsuction as the most gentle and effective method of removal. However, as the quotes below show GP practices do not routinely offer microsuction as a technique for ear wax removal and people are having to pay for this treatment privately if they want to access this option:



"I started going to a private healthcare provider as they offered microsuction, which was not available on NHS. Microsuction is much quicker and does not make me feel nauseous like syringing does. I have continued to go to a private provider ever since and now some of my friends and family members do too'.

'He [the consultant] didn't seem to think there was any possibility of getting micro-suction on the NHS'.

'They [My GP surgery] informed me that the surgery only does ear syringing not micro-suction [..] My internet research states that ear syringing is less safe than micro suction therefore all NHS should be offering this and not ear syringing. I think this is cost driven. This puts patients ear safety at more risk'.



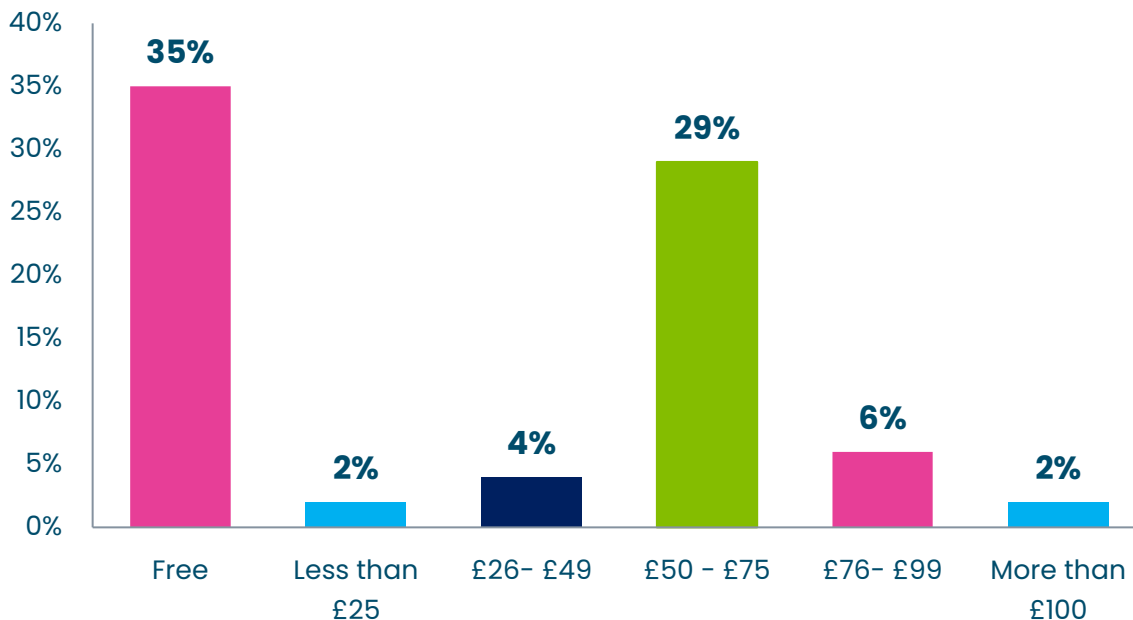
4. Cost of ear wax removal

The cost of ear wax removal for those that completed the survey ranged between being 'free' via the NHS to having to pay over £100:

- 35% of respondents had removal done for free on the NHS, either at their GP surgery or in a hospital, through an audiology department.
- 43% of respondents paid for ear wax removal with the most common price paid being between £50 and £75.
- The remaining 22% were still awaiting treatment.

The bar chart below shows how much ear wax removal cost our respondents:

How much did your ear wax removal cost?



Comments around the cost of ear wax removal illustrate how people are concerned at the increasing shift to private sector provision and cost of ear wax removal:



'I am a long-time wearer of hearing aids. A side effect is producing wax. My experience was [an] "emergency" in that I had gone completely deaf in left ear. I got a GP appointment the same day. She stated the ear was completely blocked with wax. I was advised to visit a private hearing company which was close by. No alternatives offered. Cost was £70 or £90 for both ears. [..] The procedure took less than 5 mins I was shocked at cost. This is low level procedure needing only initial outlay of equipment. It felt exploitative. I had the money, [but] others may struggle to find that unexpected cost for such a relatively minor thing. Very unhappy hearing aid user.'

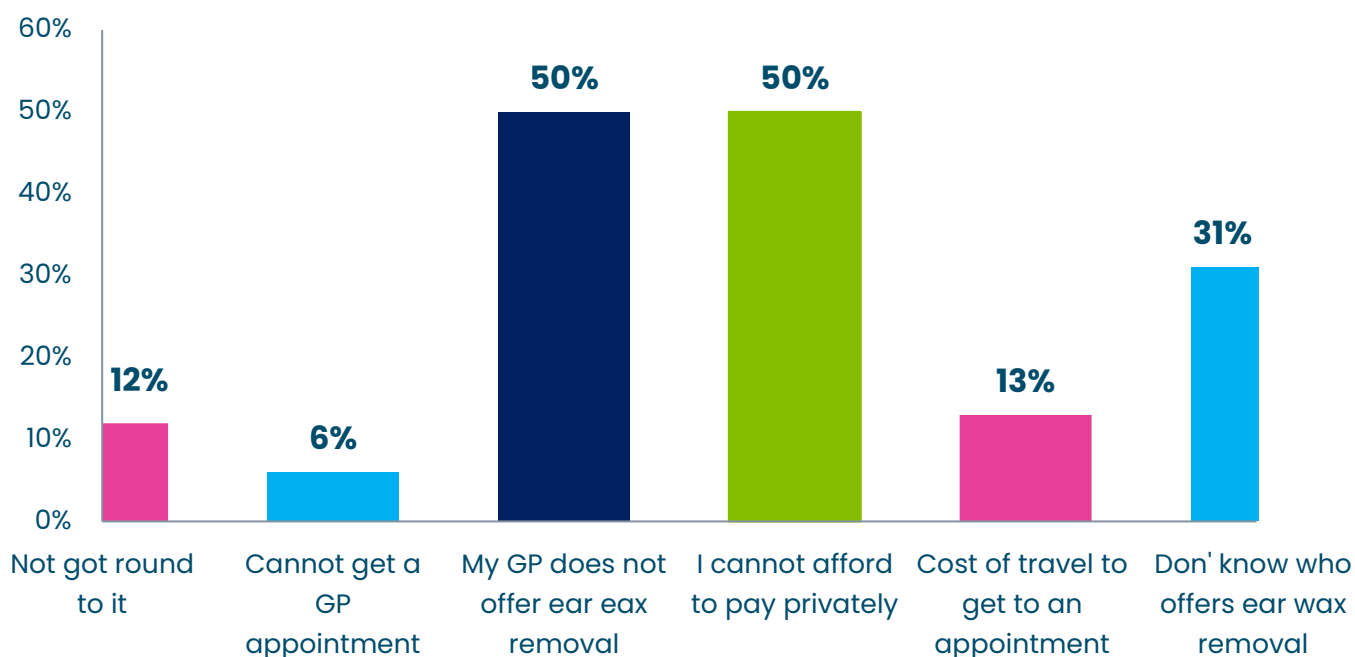
'I was very disappointed that my GP surgery would not remove my ear wax. Previously they had but they no longer offer it as a service. I felt discriminated against because I wear hearing aids which cause more wax in my ears and compact the wax to make my hearing worse. I contacted the hospital audiology department they said they couldn't do it unless my GP referred me. Eventually a friend offered to pay for me so i went to Specsavers. It cost £60 and they didn't even remove all the wax . So I'm still disappointed and suffering from hearing loss.'



5. Impact of having to pay privately for ear wax removal

In our survey we asked 'If you need ear wax removal but haven't had treatment, please tell us why?' As the bar chart demonstrates below the two most frequent responses were GP practices not offering ear wax removal, and because respondents cannot afford to pay privately:

If you need ear wax removal but haven't had treatment, please tell us why? (Please tick all that apply)



For those on low incomes and those who suffer regular occurrences of ear wax build up the cost of ear wax removal treatment can be prohibitive. The quotes below also demonstrate the concerns some respondents have over other people being unable to afford treatment:

'The GP told me to put olive oil in my ears then go to a chemist and book for it to be removed. This was approximately £25 for each ear which I couldn't afford.. no free option was given to me.'

' I'm lucky that I can afford the private costs but at almost £50 per ear, that was a lot. I routinely get ear wax build up but will have to delay getting it removed regularly'



'I had the money, but others may struggle to find that unexpected cost for such a relatively minor thing'.

'My 22 year old daughter has waited for years for a face to face appointment with ENT regarding frequent debilitating ear infections and build up of wax in her ears. She was finally offered an appointment at the ENT clinic at Eastbourne Clinic. [.....The consultants] recommendation was that she should have her ears suctioned every 3 months at Specsavers to keep her ears clear. When I pointed out that this would cost my daughter 4 x £50/ £60 a year, he didn't seem to think there was any possibility of getting micro-suction on the NHS'.



Conclusions

Through this research we have heard about how a buildup of ear wax can impact people's quality of life. We have also heard that accessing treatment for earwax removal in Brighton and Hove is not always as straightforward as it could be.

There is an inconsistent approach to ear wax removal across NHS services in Brighton and Hove. This makes it challenging for patients to navigate treatment for ear wax removal. This research supports other evidence (from both the RNID and other Healthwatch's across the country) which shows that there has been a reduction in GP practices that offer ear wax removal.

Some Brighton and Hove residents benefit from their GP practices still offering ear wax removal, others do not, and it is often unclear to patients why this is the case. Clearer information needs to be provided to patients on earwax treatment options and about recent changes in provision by GP practices.

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove are concerned about the impact of the reduction in earwax removal by GP practices on health inequalities. We would like to see more support for those on low incomes and those who require more frequent treatment (for example for those who use hearing aids).

Next steps and recommendations

Based on the findings of this survey, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove have identified the following next steps:

- 1) Healthwatch Brighton and Hove will share and discuss these findings with NHS Sussex. We will also share our report with GP Practice Managers in Brighton and Hove, and Brighton and Hove Health Overview Scrutiny Committee.
- 2) We will also share insight gained from this research with the NHS Sussex Insight bank, and Healthwatch England to support local and national intelligence on this theme.

We will also contact all GP practices in Brighton and Hove to recommend that:

GP Practices and Primary Care Networks

- All GP practices should provide information on both their websites and in their practices, about ear wax removal services that are available within their practice. If GP practices do not provide any ear wax removal services, this also needs to be made explicit on their websites and in their practices.
- If GP practices do not provide any ear wax treatments, they need to provide information to signpost patients to alternative services, for example by signposting to other GP surgeries that do offer ear wax removal within the Primary Care Network.

NHS Sussex

- We will discuss with NHS Sussex, the need for better information to be provided on self-care and management of ear wax for those most likely to suffer from ear wax build up (for example hearing aid users).
- We will also discuss with NHS Sussex, the need for provision of awareness training amongst health professionals about ear wax removal services and treatment that are available within Brighton and Hove. This training would support GP practices and other specialists in audiology to be able to refer patients to appropriate treatment for ear wax removal within the NHS.



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