

The other kind of... HEARING AIDS

By **ADRIAN MONTI**

OUR ears need as much tender loving care as the rest of our bodies, and there are many products available for everything from cleaning them to shutting out loud noises. But which are worth the money?

We asked Ram Moorthy, a consultant ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon at The Princess Grace Hospital in London, and Jonathan Hughes, a consultant ENT surgeon at King Edward VII's Hospital, also in London, to assess a selection of products. We then rated them.

MACK'S DRY-N-CLEAR EAR DRYING AID

30ml, £4.95, earplugshop.com



CLAIM: These drops are said to relieve the discomfort of water-clogged ears, which can lead to swimmer's ear. They contain the drying agent isopropyl alcohol and glycerol to moisturise the lining of the ear canal.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Moorthy says: 'Swimmer's ear is an infection that is often caused by repeated exposure to water. If water gets into the ear, it can linger and create the ideal environment for bacteria to flourish.'

'The alcohol in this product will help dry the ear, however I've not seen evidence that it can actually prevent swimmer's ear.'

'Also, the ears are generally very good at drying themselves — you could just tip your head to one side to allow water to drain out after swimming.' **5/10**

EARPOPPER

£99, amazon.co.uk



CLAIM: This hand-sized plastic device rebalances pressure in the middle ear, a build-up of which can cause pain and a feeling of the ears being 'blocked'. You put the nozzle into one nostril and close the other with your finger. Push the button to release a stream of air into that nostril and swallow at the same time. Repeat in the other nostril.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Hughes says: 'When you go on a plane, or if you have inflamed sinuses or a nasal infection, the Eustachian tube — which connects your middle ear to the back of your nose — can stop working.'

'You then get a pressure build-up in the middle ear, which you feel as pain or hearing loss. It usually resolves itself, but, in some people, can last for months.'

'The Eustachian tube opens when you swallow, so blowing air in when you do this can help to normalise pressure. It will feel a bit like blowing your nose. This is costly, though.' **8/10**

HANDHELD BULB EAR SYRINGE

£4.89, amazon.co.uk

CLAIM: Fill the rubber ball with warm water and squeeze it into the ear through the long, tapered tip. This is said to dislodge hardened wax, which then flows back out.

With cotton buds deemed unsafe, what products CAN you use to care for your ears?



Picture: GETTY

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Moorthy says: 'Our ears are good at self-cleaning and can get rid of excess earwax or dirt themselves, but sometimes it gets stuck. This can be irritating and affect hearing.'

'Ear syringes claim to dislodge this build-up, but they can damage the ear canal or the eardrum if the water is squirted too hard.'

'If you feel like you need your ears syringed, then see a health professional, who can advise and carry it out if necessary.' **2/10**

OTEX EXPRESS EAR DROPS

10ml, £4.99, boots.com

CLAIM: These drops contain urea hydrogen peroxide, which breaks down earwax. Use the pipette to apply five drops, twice a day.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Hughes says: 'In my experience, these ear drops are very good at clearing wax if it has become a problem.'

'Unlike olive oil (another suggested remedy) which softens the wax, the active ingredient here breaks it up. The effect isn't immediate, but, after a few days of using the drops, the wax will move out of the ear canal as it naturally would, so there's no need for cotton buds.' **9/10**



SAFETOTS CHILDREN'S EAR PROTECTOR

£12.95, safetots.co.uk

CLAIM: These headphone-style protectors are designed to 'lessen harmful noises without shutting out other ambient sounds'. They are suitable from young babies to seven-year-olds, it is claimed.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Moorthy says: 'Babies and young children can be sensitive to sounds, and repeated exposure to loud noise may cause some hearing loss, so ear protectors can be a good idea. But they should only be worn for short periods, such as at a fireworks display or a noisy party. They should not be used to block out everyday sounds — young children need to be exposed to some noise to help with their brain development.' **6/10**



WIFI OTOSCOPE

£45.99, amazon.co.uk

CLAIM: This turns a smartphone into an otoscope, used to look into ears. The pen-like probe wirelessly connects with your mobile phone via wifi. You then move it around your ear and a camera on its end sends images to your phone.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Moorthy says: 'The ear canal is quite difficult to navigate, and I worry that people

would go in too deep. Once you pass the outer part of the ear canal, the area becomes very sensitive and the skin is very delicate, so you can easily damage your ear with the probe, which may lead to bleeds or infection.'

'I don't think a non-expert would know what they were looking at on the image on the screen, either, so it isn't much use.' **0/10**

OTOVENT GLUE EAR TREATMENT

£6.99, chemist-4-u.com

CLAIM: Said to ease the symptoms of glue ear, a condition common in children, where a build-up of fluid in the middle ear puts pressure on the eardrum, causing pain and dulled hearing.

The kit contains a balloon and nose piece. Holding one nostril shut, you blow into the balloon with your other nostril, and then repeat the process with the opposite nostril. Inflating the balloon is said to force open the Eustachian tube, allowing air into the middle ear and clearing it of fluid.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Hughes says: 'As many as eight in ten children will experience glue ear before the age of ten. However, for the majority, the condition corrects

itself without treatment. If this doesn't happen, then I recommend this method. As you blow up the balloon, some of the air in the nasal cavity goes into the balloon, while some tries to force the Eustachian tube open to help clear fluid.'

'A person with glue ear needs to do this on a daily basis for four weeks to gain the most benefit — and a hearing test can check if it has worked.' **8/10**

SAFE AND SOUND REUSABLE CLEANERS

Pack of ten, £5.49, amazon.co.uk

CLAIM: These look like cotton buds, but, instead, one end is cupped to scoop out earwax, while the other is ribbed to make removing wax easier. They can be used to clear away dead skin from the ear, too, the maker claims.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Hughes says: 'Just as with ordinary cotton buds, you should not use these. They might scoop out some wax, but the majority will be pushed further in. Use Otex ear drops (reviewed above) or olive oil to loosen wax, then let it naturally fall out. Do not root around inside your ear, as you can easily damage it.' **0/10**

HYLAND'S EARACHE DROPS

10ml, £14.80, biovea.net

CLAIM: These drops contain six homeopathic ingredients, including belladonna, which the maker claims will ease pain, inflammation and congestion in the ear.

As well as swimmer's ear, it's claimed the drops will relieve irritation caused by colds and allergies without antibiotics. Apply four drops up to four times a day.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Hughes says: 'A lot of people in online reviews seem to think that these made a difference, but there is no evidence a homeopathic product such as this works. It may be that it is quite soothing, as it is oily, but the ingredients are unproven. It claims to help earache, but if you do have pain, you need to see a doctor to determine the cause.' **2/10**

BIOEARS SOFT SILICONE EARPLUGS

£4.89, chemistdirect.co.uk

CLAIM: These earplugs protect ears from water and noise, it is claimed, and have an anti-microbial coating.

EXPERT VERDICT: Mr Moorthy says: 'These would be useful for people who are sensitive to loud sounds and have hyperacusis, which means everyday sounds can cause pain.'

'The plugs dampen noise levels to 22 decibels — around the sound of rustling leaves — which may be good when trying to sleep.'

'But earplugs should not be used excessively, as air needs to circulate around your ears or a moist environment will develop, allowing bacteria to grow.' **7/10**

SLEEP SECRETS

How scientists discovered the secrets of our sleep

THIS week: Sleep deprivation

IN 1896, American psychologists G.T. Patrick and J.A. Gilbert performed a landmark experiment on sleep deprivation by keeping three young men awake for 90 hours. They reported how their subjects suffered decreased attention span, memory and grip strength. One volunteer had visual hallucinations.

This was the first scientific study to establish how a single extended bout of sleeplessness would

lead to significant mental and physical deficits. In 1983, a trial on rats at Chicago University's Sleep Research Laboratory further revealed the horrors of constant sleep deprivation — all the rats died from sepsis within three weeks, reported the journal *Science*. This suggested that sleep deprivation lowers the immune system's ability to fight infection. Subsequent studies have shown how sleep-deprived patients in intensive care units often succumb to sepsis.

