

Can earbuds cause ear problems?

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Julia Addis started getting ear infections while she was in college. Then, when she was working remotely at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, she got them even more frequently.

"I thought it would go away on its own," she said. "It actually just ended up getting worse."

So she finally went to see Elias Michaelides, MD, an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist at Rush University Medical Center. At the visit, she learned her frequent earbud use was causing the problem. Addis' job requires her to talk to clients so often that she was wearing her earbuds for seven or eight hours a day. After a while, her ear canals started getting irritated. She also got [ear infections](#).

Now, with more jobs going remote during the pandemic, people are using earbuds more than ever before. But overuse can lead to ear infections and ear canal irritation, just like it did for Addis. The good news is it's preventable. Here's what you can do.

1. Find the right fit

"First and foremost," Michaelides says, "use a device that fits your ear canal."

Both earbuds and people's ear canals vary widely in size and shape, so it might take some trial and error to find the right pair for you.

It's important to make sure your earbuds fit your ears. To ensure they fit right, make sure they sit easily in your ears. If they're too big, you'll feel pressure. If they're too small, they'll be loose. Earbuds that fit you right should sit in your ear without you really noticing. "Sometimes if the device is not sitting well it can cause irritation in the ear canal,"

Michaelides says. If you use them for longer periods of time, he adds, moisture can build up and make your ears more vulnerable to [infection](#) or irritation.

But are some brands or models better than others? "I haven't noticed any specific brand that has different risks," Michaelides says. It's possible some can cause irritation more than others, but he also noted there isn't really any data to suggest it. Trying pairs until you find the right,

comfortable fit is your best bet.

2. Take breaks

When using earbuds, give yourself breaks throughout the day. Without breaks, you increase the risk of infections and irritation. Breaks help air circulate in your [ears](#). They reduce friction too.

Michaelides recommends breaks of at least five to 10 minutes for every hour of use.

Taking breaks has helped give Addis relief. They've helped her keep in touch with her clients throughout the work day without suffering from the infections and irritation she used to experience.

3. Keep your earbuds clean

It's also important to keep your earbuds clean to prevent infections or irritation. Use a cotton swab once a week to wipe away dust or wax buildup. You can also use a toothpick to clean hard-to-reach corners or crevices on the outside of the earbuds.

A toothbrush might also be a good tool to clean some earbuds. If you think you've gotten all of the dirt or wax buildup on the outside, blow into the mesh grill that protects the earbuds' speakers to loosen any remaining bits. Once done, wipe all surfaces with a soft cloth.

4. Don't write off irritation as an allergic reaction

Some people with ear irritation assume they're allergic to the materials their earbuds are made of. But that's not likely, Michaelides says. He doesn't rule out an allergic reaction as a source for ear infections and

irritation, but those cases are very rare. Most of the time, it's overuse that causes the problems.

That means the answer to irritation is not usually finding earbuds made of a different material. Instead, find the right fit, take breaks and keep your earbuds clean. Still, if you think you may be having an allergic reaction, set your earbuds aside and consult a doctor. While such reactions are rare, you can usually find relief faster by pinpointing the cause of your irritation.

5. Seek help as soon as there's a problem

Looking back, Addis wishes she had gone to see Michaelides sooner.

"I guess a mistake I made was I thought it would go away on its own, and it actually just ended up getting worse," she says. One time, she even had to go to two different emergency rooms because the pain got so bad. Knowing what she knows now, she would advise anyone else experiencing the same issues to seek out help quickly so they can get the antibiotic drops or topical treatments they need for infection or irritation.

If you start to experience symptoms, first make sure your earbuds are clean. Then take short breaks from use—five to 10 minutes per hour of use. If symptoms persist, see a doctor.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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