

Ear Candling Experiment

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Ear Candling is an old folk remedy that some people are now practicing for profit. It is a practice in which a hollow candle is placed in someone's ear and then lit on fire. Practitioners of ear candling claim that the heat and the vacuum of the burning candle draw ear wax out of the ear canal.

I am concerned about ear candling for several reasons. Many of the people doing it professionally have no medical license and do not use otoscopes because of a concern that they would be diagnosing and therefore practicing medicine without a license. I've heard some outrageous claims about the candling removing large quantities of earwax and "candida" (yeast) from the ear. When the candle is burnt down to within about 2 inches from the ear the practitioners will open it up and show the client all the wax and candida that supposedly came from their ear.

I did an experiment using two of these ear candles. I placed one ear candle in a 2-dram homeopathic vial (about the size and shape of the ear canal) and then burned it down. As it burned I saw smoke go into the vial. I also saw some powder (ash from the fabric of the candle) drop into the vial. After burning the candle I opened it up to observe the contents. I then burned the other ear candle in someone's ear, following the procedures taught to me by several different ear candlers. I opened that candle as well and found the same amount of wax and powder (supposedly candida) in both candles.

I have talked to ear candlers about this experiment. Several have stated that their candles were of superior quality and would not leave wax and powder in the bottom of the candle when burned down. I've purchased some of these "superior" candles and have found as much wax and powder after burning them down as with the other candles I've used.

I have experienced ear candling myself and I don't feel that the heat or vacuum is enough to melt and draw wax out of the ear. The wax in the ear candle at the end of a candling session is from the candle itself. The powder is the ash from the fabric of the candle. If anyone had that much candida in their ear they would be very sick.

On the positive side, I've seen middle ear infections respond very quickly to ear candling. I suspect the effect may be from the vacuum and/or smoke killing any aerobic bacteria. This suspicion was strengthened when a student stated that when he was little his mother treated his ear infections by gently blowing cigarette smoke into his ear with a straw. I have since heard similar stories from several people.

I did some ear candling on clients using an otoscope to examine the ear canal before and after the candling. I stopped doing ear candling when I saw more wax in one of my client's ears after the candling.

One of my clients reported experiencing the pain of hot wax dripping on her eardrum while having her husband do ear candling on her. She then saw an M.D. to have her ears cleaned. She was too embarrassed to tell him what happened, but he commented about the scarring on her eardrum. I examined her ears recently with an otoscope and could still see the scar on her left eardrum, over one year after her injury.

Another person I know said her doctor thought she had been at the beach and had sand in her ear. She was too embarrassed to tell him she had her ears candled recently. The "sand" was the fragments of the burnt candle fabric that fell into her ear. See the contents in the vial that we used in our experiment and you can see what goes into the ear with ear candling.

Because of my concerns about ear candling I posted some inquiries on mailing lists on the internet. I learned of two people in Seattle who had hot wax burn their ear canals or eardrums from the ear candling. I understand the problem may happen if the candle is not held completely vertical. If the candle is tipped slightly it can burn too quickly and cause hot wax to drip down into the ear.

Recently I have been corresponding with a woman who had surgery to repair a hole in her eardrum caused by hot wax from ear candling. We are waiting to find out if the surgery was successful.

The safest way of cleaning out ear wax is to soften it with olive oil or one of the over the counter ear wax softeners, then to get your ears cleaned out with warm water.

If you are doing ear candling be aware of the risks involved and please get an otoscope and have someone show you how to use it, so that you can see what you are doing. Also be aware that any injuries caused by ear candling would not be covered under a massage therapists liability insurance, since it would be considered outside the scope of practice of a massage therapist. If you know someone doing ear candling please pass this on to them.

More information on ear candling can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ear_candling

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Candle burning in 2 dram vial



After burning the candle looks like this



Smoke and ash going into the vial



Wax and "candida" from ear



Wax and "candida" from vial



This vial was clear before the experiment



This powder came from the vial. Imagine what's left in your ear from the candling