

Case Report

Ear Candling: A Dangerous Pleasure?

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Abstract

Ear candling is an alternative medicine practice alleged to enhance general health by putting an end of a hollow candle in the ear canal and lighting up the other end of it. It also is advertised for cerumen and debris (bacteria and fungi) removal.

Ear candling is claimed to create negative pressure for drawing cerumen from the ear and to benefit the ears in many ways. It is however not free of complications and is now banned. Here we would like to highlight potential complications to this.

Keywords:

Ear candling, Ear coning, Thermal auricular therapy

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Case Report

A 33-year-old Kazakh lady was referred to the otorhinolaryngology clinic regarding a history of pain inside her right ear for the past 2 days, not accompanied by ear discharge, hearing loss, giddiness, nausea/vomiting or tinnitus. There was no history of trauma or upper respiratory tract infection. She was otherwise healthy with no previous medical history and this was the first time she had experienced such a symptom.

On observation and examination of the external ear and the periauricular area, no sign of previous surgery, inflammation or tenderness was detected. On otoscopy, a yellowish polypoid pedicled mass originating from the antero-inferior wall of the external auditory meatus and in direct contact with the central part of the tympanic membrane was reported.

After explaining the odd appearance and the specific color of this mass to the patient, she mentioned that the symptom had started shortly after she had undergone ear candling in a body massage centre.

On ear evaluation under a microscopic view, the nature and consistency of the ear mass was similar to hardened candle wax. The pedicle mentioned earlier was nothing but the tail of the molten wax drop attached to the auditory meatus! (Fig 1)

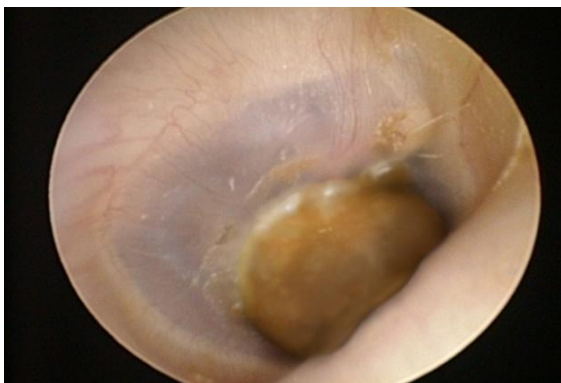


Fig 1: candle wax drop in the right ear canal

Detachment of the pedicle from the meatus was first done by using a Jobson-Horn instrument, and then, taking care not to damage the tympanic membrane, the wax

drop was pulled out using a semi-sharp hook manually angulated to properly reach to the back of the foreign body. Post removal, the patient felt transient dizziness.



Fig 2: Candle wax after removal

After removal of the wax drop, close evaluation of the canal did not show any obvious injury. Tympanic membrane in the area beneath the wax drop was whitish, wrinkled and depressed, but there was no perforation.

Two weeks later, evaluation of the canal and tympanic membrane showed some improvement in its appearance. No sign of infection in the ear canal was detected. Pure tone audiometry and tympanometry were also reported normal.

One month following the procedure, the ear drum was almost back to normal with a depression in the middle of pars tensa.

Discussion

Ear candling which has also been called ear coning or thermal-auricular therapy is an alternative medicine practice (1), usually offered by some massage therapists, beauty-salon operators and herbalists (2). Alleged to enhance general health by putting an end of a hollow candle in the ear canal and lighting up the other end, it also is advertised for cerumen and debris (bacteriae and fungi) removal (1,2).

Ear candling is claimed to create negative pressure for drawing cerumen from the ear. This practice has been originated from

the ancient Tibet, China, India, Egypt, and pre-Columbian America (Hopi people) (1,3); even Atlantis is believed as a possible origin. Hollow candles are made of cotton soaked in wax, beeswax or paraffin and allowed to harden. Some waxes may contain herbs or other materials including sage, chamomile, rose, periwinkle, jojoba, quassia bark, yucca root, rosemary, burdock root, osha root, St John’s worth or honey (1,3).

The most common practice is to have the customer to lie to his/her side. The exposed ear may be safeguarded by a collecting plate on top, and then the candle will be inserted into the ear canal through the hole in the plate. Now the candle is lit, and the hole in the top of the candle is maintained open throughout the procedure by trimming the wick or using instruments like a toothpick (Fig 3).



Fig 3: Ear candling procedure

After the candle is burned out its remnant is removed and opened, claimed that whatever inside it is earwax, toxins and other residues of the ear canal vacuumed inside the candle. Then the ear canal is cleaned with a cotton swab and treated with “ear oil” (1,4). Unproven, but it is believed that ear candling has some benefits (5,6) (Table 1).

Table 1: Non-Proven benefits of Ear Candling

Relieve sinusitis	Cleanse the ear canal	Improve hearing	improve lymphatic circulation
Regulate blood pressure	Purify the mind	Strengthen the brain	Relieve otitis media symptoms
Cure otitis externa	Relieve otalgia	Sharpen the senses of smell, taste, and color perception	Stabilize emotions
Reduce TMJ pain and stiffness	Relieve vertigo	Improve the central nervous system functions	Stop tinnitus
Purify the blood	Work as an anti-inflammatory or antibiotic	Cure Meniere's syndrome	Clear the eyes
Reduce tension and stress	Cure auricular herpes zoster	Open the chakras and cleanse astral bodies	Release blocked energy

Some outrageous benefits are also advocated to ear candling such as controlling autoimmune diseases or cancers (3).

But all these claimed benefits come with real dangers as:

- Hot wax burns on and inside the ear.
- Candle wax induced obstruction of the ear canal.
- Burns and perforation of the Tympanic membrane and trauma to the middle ear and ossicles.

In 1996, Seely et al (2) using a Tympanometric

measurement device in an ear canal model showed that ear candles do not produce negative pressure. A limited clinical trial (eight ears, four with no cerumen and four with cerumen impaction) showed no removal of cerumen from the external auditory canal of those with ear wax impaction. Candle wax was also noted depositing in 2 out of the four cerumen free ears. A questionnaire based survey performed on 122 otolaryngologists, indicated that 21 ear injuries diagnosed by them was caused by using the ear candling

method. These injuries consisted of 13 burns of the auricular and external auditory canal, 7 partial or complete occlusions of the ear canal with candle wax, and one tympanic membrane perforation. Otitis externa and temporary hearing loss were the following problems in 3 and 6 patients, respectively. Seely concluded that ear candles have no benefit in the management of cerumen and may result in serious injury (2,7).

In November 1998, the FDA announced marketing ear candles illegal because they were considered unapproved medical devices that would be dangerous to use (8). FDA also warned some ear candle importing manufacturing companies regarding their activities (9,10). Despite these precautions, ear candles are still widely available in traditional massage and spa centers through the Internet (3) and at health-food stores. Even some Institutes used to (or still do) have conferences regarding this age-old treatment and offer correspondence courses leading to "certification as an earconologist" (7).

Conclusion

This procedure is quite popular worldwide especially in South-East Asia and in some cases is offered as a free service to

sweeten buying a massage package. It is advisable to aware the public (as the target group) about the unwanted side-effects of ear candling. It may be quite traumatic to the ear especially due to the molten wax that could burn the tympanic membrane. Such a perforation caused by thermal injury is less likely to heal as the edges would have been "Cauterized" preventing epithelial growth. On the other hand, if hot wax passes the TM perforation it may also damage middle ear structures.

The Editorial Comments

This case report is published in our journal in order to warn otorhinolaryngologists about the various practices being performed under the name of conventional modalities such as alternative medicine. Although we do not have ear candling in Iran, but in reality there are several other similar dangerous practices in the field of ear treatments, especially done throughout our country. Thanks to Dr Nahid's article, we emphasize that unprofessional ear manipulation in anyway can have serious consequences, endangering the patient's health. One other problem not mentioned in this article and worth paying attention is postponing the patients seeking proper medical services.

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