

# Self-ear cleaning and associated risk of ear injuries and ear related symptoms among students in the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

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**Background:** Self-ear cleaning (SEC) is recognized as a common habit where it tends to remain a hidden healthcare complication with respect to its potential ability to compromise the integrity of the ear by causing damage to the hearing apparatus. This has high prevalence rates among low- and middle-income countries compared to high income countries.

**Objectives:** To determine prevalence, practices and associated risk of ear injuries and ear related symptoms following SEC among students in the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

**Methods:** A quantitative descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted within the University of Kelaniya (six faculties and one institute). The target population indicated was 11,672 where the purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants. Data was collected from 170 internal undergraduate students with Sri Lankan nationality, regardless of their academic year of study. An online self-administered semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants.

**Results:** Prevalence of SEC was 98.8% among all students and all faculties/institute presented with a 100% prevalence rate except in the Faculty of Medicine (96.5%). The majority perceived SEC to be beneficial and a family influence regarding encouragement of the practice was observed. The commonest object used was cotton buds to self-clean ears and the majority of participants had engaged in this practice between 1-5 years. Ear wax was the commonest reason given to engage with SEC. 7.1% of the students reported ear injuries caused by forceful use of various objects to self-clean ears. Overall, no association was observed between SEC and ear injuries as well as with SEC and ear related symptoms. Nonetheless, a statistically significant association was obtained with each presenting ear, ear itchiness, feeling fullness of the ear after SEC ( $p=0.006$ ,  $0.008$ ,  $0.031$ ) as well as with experiencing earache and feeling fullness of the ear with use of cotton buds ( $p=0.024$ ,  $0.021$ ).

**Conclusion:** SEC has a potential to cause damage to the ear structure. Large scale awareness programmes are recommended to be undertake from the lowest to the highest education levels due to a lack of knowledge presented regarding this habit.

**Key words:** *Self-ear cleaning, SEC, Injury, Ear symptoms, Cotton buds, Knowledge, Family influence*