



What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the sensation of a sound heard in the ears or head, experienced when there is no apparent external cause for the sound. It is not a disease in itself, but rather a symptom experienced due to some dysfunction of the hearing ('auditory') system and its central connections in the brain. The word 'tinnitus' is derived from Latin and means 'tinkling or ringing like a bell'.

About 17-20 percent of Australians will experience tinnitus at some stage, varying from short-lived intermittent symptoms to constant, intrusive and distressing tinnitus. It is common for tinnitus to vary according to stress, tiredness, background noise and being distracted by other tasks.

Types of sounds experienced with tinnitus

There are many different sounds that people can experience. Common descriptions include ringing, buzzing, whistling, howling, roaring or humming. Different sounds are not consistently associated with different causes of tinnitus.

What causes tinnitus?

For many people, there is no specific cause of tinnitus. When a cause can be found, the more common reasons are:

- Hearing loss related to ageing, excessive noise exposure or genetic hearing loss.
- Exposure to loud noises, especially if prolonged or recurrent.
- Meniere's Disease (an inner ear condition resulting in hearing loss, tinnitus and severe vertigo).
- Some prescription and non-prescription drugs.
- Head/brain trauma, such as car accidents, assaults or some types of stroke.

How tinnitus affects people

Most people who experience tinnitus are not distressed by it. A number of people who consult their doctor about it do so to ensure there is no concerning or dangerous underlying cause for their symptom, and do not need further treatment or testing once this has been excluded. Some people are worried that the tinnitus itself will damage their ears, in the way that external loud noise can. This has clearly been shown to **not** be the case.

However, a significant number of people who experience tinnitus find the noise in itself to be a source of significant distress. Tinnitus can be the cause of, and be made worse by, depression or anxiety, mood swings, tension, irritation or frustration, poor concentration and difficulty sleeping.

In some cases, people find their tinnitus so severe that they think about committing suicide. If this is something that you are thinking about, please discuss this with your doctor or call Lifeline (13 11 14) before harming yourself.

Tinnitus treatments

Many people are wrongly told that nothing can be done about their tinnitus and that they will just 'have to learn to live with it'. Although there is no cure for tinnitus, those affected can learn techniques to successfully manage their tinnitus to the point where it is no longer a problem for them. People with tinnitus can continue to lead full and productive lives.

Loud noise will exacerbate tinnitus

Wear earmuffs or earplugs for activities such as mowing the lawn or using a chainsaw.

Avoid loud nightclubs or use ear protection. If you have to shout to make yourself heard when someone is standing about one metre from you, the noise level is too loud and will make your tinnitus worse.

Avoid stress

There is strong anecdotal evidence that stress exacerbates tinnitus. Although stress is part of everyday life you can take steps to reduce stress levels by undertaking relaxation therapies, making sure you eat well, sleep well and get an adequate amount of exercise, and manage your work/family duties to minimize anticipated stressful periods.

Use of distraction and masking noise

Keeping yourself busy is often an excellent way to avoid focusing on your tinnitus. Exercising, paid work, pursuing a hobby or spending time with family or friends will reduce the time you have to focus on the 'ringing'.

If the tinnitus is particularly intrusive in quiet environments, consider using a quiet radio in the background, or a 'wave machine' to increase background noise. Avoid using the television to create this noise at night in the bedroom, as the screen images will tend to keep you awake, worsening the situation. There are now several free apps which allow you to create a soundscape that you find effective.

Hearing aids

Good quality and properly fitting hearing aids can reduce your perception of tinnitus by improving your hearing and take away the strain of listening.

Medications (western and alternative)

There are no specific drugs for the treatment of tinnitus. Sedatives and drugs may prove helpful in the early stages. However, drugs without counselling are rarely effective. Alternative medicines and acupuncture can be helpful in individual cases, but there are no studies showing them to be of consistent benefit across large numbers of people compared to placebo when research has been done.

Surgery

Surgery is seldom justified and can often aggravate tinnitus.

Hypnotherapy and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Hypnotherapy can indirectly help by aiding relaxation. Cognitive behavioural therapy, which is offered by clinical psychologists, can help you to change the way you think about tinnitus, learn ways to focus your attention away from your tinnitus, and control the stress associated with tinnitus. Online self-learning programs to manage tinnitus may also be helpful, such as Tune Out (tuneout.com.au).

Diet

Diet regimes are sometimes helpful. However, dietary exclusion trials are needed to prove or disprove that suspected foods aggravate tinnitus. Try easing off caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate or cola drinks) and alcohol as they can temporarily worsen tinnitus for some people. Also avoid quinine (tonic water), nicotine and marijuana.

Other treatments

There are many other treatments for tinnitus, with varying amounts of evidence for their effectiveness. Some, which have been shown to be effective in one person, will have no benefit in another, so a certain amount of 'trial and error' might be needed before you find your perfect therapy. The Tinnitus Association of Victoria can provide extensive information about your options.

Beware 'Tinnitus Cures'

There are many so-called 'Tinnitus Cures' on the market. Most of these have no scientific basis. For information about a specific treatment, consult your doctor or contact the Tinnitus Association of Victoria.

Contact the Tinnitus Association of Victoria for further information/help

Website: tinnitus.org.au phone: (03) 9770 6075