

Audiology Department

Tinnitus: A Patient Information Guide

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the name given to the noises that can sometimes be heard by people when there is no external sound. Tinnitus can either be heard in one ear, both ears or described as 'in the head'. It is often referred to as 'ringing in the ears', and people describe hearing a ringing, whistling, humming, or buzzing noise. It can be a high, medium, or low-pitched noise and can vary in loudness. It can be present all the time, but it can also come and go.

Research has shown that tinnitus can start anywhere along the hearing system, but sometimes can be because of damage to the tiny hair cells within the cochlea. Potentially everyone can hear tinnitus. It is felt to be an overactive hearing system which the brain then decodes as noises. Tinnitus results when this over activity is further heightened by the brain. Thus, the brain rather than filtering out the sounds filters the sounds in, resulting in the person hearing tinnitus. This may cause acute anxiety and distress for a person.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus is neither an illness nor a disease; it may start gradually or suddenly and is rarely linked to any serious problem. There may be no known cause for the start of tinnitus but often it may be the result of a change in hearing. More than half of the population will experience hearing loss due to ageing, and tinnitus may be present with the hearing loss.

People may notice tinnitus after being exposed to loud noises, for instance a noisy disco, nightclub, or loud industrial noises.

Sometimes it can be linked to a change in people's circumstances such as a change in job, marital status or illness which may cause emotional upset.

Tinnitus can also be a result of a build up of wax in the ear canal, an ear infection or injury.

Very rarely it can occur as a side effect of some medication, if concerned check with your doctor.

How common is tinnitus?

Most people experience a spontaneous sound in their ears that appears for seconds and then disappears. Tinnitus that lasts for longer than seconds is very common in all age groups, even children. About 10% of the population have frequent tinnitus and 5% of the adult population in the UK experience persistent or troublesome tinnitus.

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What makes tinnitus troublesome?

As we have already mentioned the reason tinnitus develops involves both the ear and the brain. It is how the brain responds to the surplus energy along the hearing nerve that creates the tinnitus noise.

Tinnitus can make you feel anxious and stressed. It can become more noticeable by outside factors such as stressful situations, tiredness, and depression. You may become aware of a vicious circle developing of stress, tinnitus and increased stress and increased tinnitus. You may notice that your sleep is affected, as it may take a little longer to get to sleep or you may wake up more during the night.

What should I do if I notice tinnitus?

If you think that you have tinnitus it is wise to see your doctor, they may be able to rule out any medical conditions that may be related to the tinnitus. If the tinnitus is very severe or causing acute anxiety, they may refer you to the Tinnitus Clinic in the Audiology Department here at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital for further investigations and advice.

Try not to worry about the noises that you are hearing. It helps if you try not to monitor the noises, or to look for cures as this will stimulate the brain's active filtering system which maintains the tinnitus.

As the brain is central to the production and maintenance of the tinnitus how you think and feel about it are very important. Thus, as you start to view the tinnitus differently the brain is able to disregard and ignore the tinnitus signal and you learn to live without hearing the tinnitus.

Tips for managing your tinnitus:

- At times it helps to have some background sounds on but it's also important to be able to sit in a quiet room and feel at ease when you hear your tinnitus. Your brain needs to be able to hear the tinnitus and accept it as a neutral/safe sound it can subconsciously filter out.
- During these times think of your tinnitus as a background sound like the heating or air conditioning; these are sounds, which your brain subconsciously filters out.
- When you start to feel less anxious about your tinnitus your brain will automatically filter it out, as it is no longer perceived as a threat to you.
- Remember that tinnitus is a meaningless noise. A noise which may irritate you but it cannot do you any harm. (The stress you feel from being irritated is more harmful than the tinnitus).
- A good social life and hobbies/interests will help you to deal with tinnitus. You should find that if you are occupied you are less aware of the tinnitus.

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Further help and advice:

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