

# Understanding tinnitus

If you hear disturbing sounds inside your ears or head, which aren't coming from your surroundings, you may have tinnitus.

With tinnitus, the sound sensations don't sound the same for everyone. They can range from ringing, whistling and humming to hissing-type noises. Some people with tinnitus hear more than one sound at a time.

To some people the perception of sound seems to be in their ears. Others perceive it to be inside the head. Ongoing tinnitus is often a sign of some degree of damage to hearing.

## Who gets tinnitus?

Most people will experience tinnitus – albeit temporarily. Attending loud rock concert can bring on a spell of tinnitus, for example.

But nearly one in five people have nuisance-level tinnitus. About one in 100 people have more annoying tinnitus. And one in 200 people have such severe, chronic tinnitus that they can suffer from lack of sleep, poor concentration and depression.

## What causes tinnitus?

Many things can cause tinnitus, including exposure to loud noise and some drugs. People with ongoing tinnitus often have damage to the tiny "hair" cells on the inner ear's cochlea organ.

Typically, in people with tinnitus not all the sensory functions on these "hair" cells work properly. And the brain, in turn, perceives the malfunction as sound.

All sorts of things can aggravate tinnitus including: stress; loud sounds; aspirin; caffeine; nicotine; and alcohol.

Stress almost always makes it worse. That's because stress increases the volume-control setting in the brain.

People with tinnitus may not have any perceptible hearing loss.

## If I think I have tinnitus what should I do?

Have a hearing test for starters. See an Audiologist who is a Member of the New Zealand Audiological Society (MNZAS) or a LIFE Unlimited Hearing Therapist.

# Treatments for tinnitus

**There is no magic bullet for tinnitus. The aim with all treatments is to reduce its annoyance and intrusiveness.**

## Auditory habituation therapy

This therapy retrains the part of the brain which picks up the "sound" in the ears or head so as to remove the awareness of it from the consciousness. In other words, it desensitises the sufferer to the tinnitus. It involves wearing a therapeutic noise generator device (which looks like a hearing aid and emits a low hissing noise) for at least eight hours a day.

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## **Devices**

A number of devices can be used for sound therapy. The goal is to introduce fairly constant low level sound which blends with (but does not cover) the tinnitus. For this approach to be successful it requires the tinnitus sufferer to have sound stimulation for a minimum of 8 hours per day for up to 12-18 months.

### **Bedside noise generators**

Bedside noise generators (sometimes called "maskers" or sound conditioners) look like small radios. Most play background-noise, such as rain falling or ocean surf rolling. They can be fitted with headphones or pillow speakers so that your partner can't hear them.

### **Hearing aids**

Wearing a hearing aid fitted by an audiologist with specialist expertise in tinnitus can be a very effective way of managing the condition. The person with tinnitus wears hearing aids to make surrounding sounds a little louder to lessen the awareness of tinnitus.

Some of the latest digital hearing aids now offer new solutions to tinnitus management. They provide maximum amplification of low-level sounds; medium-level amplification of moderate sounds; and little or no amplification of high-level sounds. Meaning, people can more easily ignore their tinnitus.

Multiple-programme hearing aids have the facility for users to switch between different settings. Hence, the user can choose between hearing programmes optimised for listening to speech and tinnitus programmes designed to reduce their awareness of tinnitus.

### **Counselling**

Your Audiologist or Hearing Therapist can show you a range of techniques for coping with and adapting to tinnitus.

### **Social support**

People often misunderstand the frustrations that can come with tinnitus. Sufferers need understanding. So how can family and friends help?

- Reduce loud noises at home, in the workplace or at social gatherings.
- Understand why they might want to avoid noisy situations.
- Do what you can to reduce their stress levels

Information from Auckland University Tinnitus Clinic website

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