

So what is tinnitus anyway?

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Any noise that you hear in your ears that is not real noise is called tinnitus. One-third of all adults have experienced tinnitus at some point in their lives. Some people describe it as a ringing or buzzing sound. Sometimes people experience a perfect note that is always the same. For other people, the type of sound will change, or they will experience a static-sounding noise in their ears.

Tinnitus is a symptom that something is not quite right with the nerves that connect the ear to the brain or the parts of the brain that process sound. Tinnitus is often, but not always, associated with decreased hearing. Tinnitus is not a sign of a serious health condition, but for some people tinnitus can make it hard to hear, causing anxiety, difficulty sleeping and poor concentration.



Tinnitus is very common for those who have had significant noise exposure. Many people have experienced tinnitus after attending a loud concert. Tinnitus is an important sign that the music was too loud and was damaging the ear. The Veterans Administration recognizes tinnitus as a problem for our veterans who have been exposed to acoustic trauma, such as bombs, motors or the drone of helicopters. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders states that tinnitus is one of the most common service-related disabilities among veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, in these situations, the noise is impossible to avoid.

It should be noted that tinnitus can be associated with other health conditions such as Ménière's disease, thyroid imbalances, hormonal changes or sinus infections. Although it is rare, tinnitus can be also associated with tumors. For others, it is as simple as excessive earwax, which can be easily removed.

Many medications can cause tinnitus, even medications as common as aspirin. If you are experiencing tinnitus, you should talk with your doctor or pharmacist to determine if any of your medications have ototoxic (*ear damaging*) side effects. If your tinnitus is being caused by medications, you and your physician can determine if other options are available. *(Do not stop taking medications as directed without talking to your physician!)*

When you talk to your health care provider, it is important to discuss if the tinnitus is in one ear or both (*some people cannot tell which side of the head they experience the tinnitus from*), if the tinnitus comes and goes, or if the tinnitus pulses. Your health care provider can help determine if there are any underlying conditions that may be causing the tinnitus. It is also important to have a comprehensive hearing test to see if the tinnitus can be explained by changes in hearing. One important aspect of this test is speech discrimination. When patients have better clarity and more hearing loss in one ear versus the other ear, it is a sign of acoustic neuromas, which are non-cancerous tumors but are still problematic due to their location close to the brain.

In MOST cases you will learn that there are simply some changes in hearing occurring that are causing the tinnitus.

The next question is what can be done about tinnitus? Frankly, often amplification with hearing aids is a significant help for tinnitus sufferers. Hearing aids can be adjusted to carefully control outside levels of noise and to add back in the regions where hearing has changed. This gives the cochlea (*the part of the ear that detects sound*) something to hear where it was missing those sounds before. Some hearing aids can be purchased, without additional cost, with tinnitus maskers. These maskers add a sound designed to cover up or mask the tinnitus. The level, intensity and pitch of these maskers is controlled by the audiologist, working closely with the patient to find the right sound.

Most people with tinnitus will say they experience more problems at night when they are trying to fall asleep, which is very exasperating. There are steps that can be taken to overcome this, including sleeping with a fan on, and playing soft music or environmental sounds like waves, which help to cover up the tinnitus and prevent it from being problematic. Counseling and biofeedback can also play an important role in elevating tinnitus symptoms. Currently the results of therapies such as acupuncture and herbal remedies do not have enough research to prove their effectiveness, but many patients feel they have been helped through these approaches.