

Tinnitus is the name given to noises heard in the ear or head which are not generated by an external source of sound. The noises are usually described as ringing, whistling, buzzing or humming but include more complex sounds such as music. Tinnitus is very common (around 10% of us frequently experience tinnitus and nearly everyone has occasional tinnitus). Tinnitus is not a disease but a non-specific symptom which is rarely linked to any serious problem.

Understanding how we hear

Sound is vibrations in air which travel down the ear canal causing the eardrum to vibrate. This vibration is transmitted through the three bones in our middle ear into the cochlea. Thousands of tiny hair cells in the cochlea convert these vibrations to nerve impulses which are sent up the nerve of hearing to the brain. The brain analyses the sound and uses to our memory of sounds to classify whether it is important and needs our attention or whether it can be ignored.

Understanding how we hear tinnitus

Tinnitus is thought to be generated in the hearing pathway and can occur in people with completely healthy ears. Sometimes a change can draw attention to the tinnitus sounds. This may be related to our ears such as exposure to loud sounds or a change in hearing or a period of illness or stress. For most people the tinnitus sound is classified as not important and in time can be ignored. For some people the tinnitus is misclassified which keeps our brain listening to the tinnitus. Most people are not troubled by the tinnitus but some people find it bothersome and may get anxious or annoyed which tends to make the tinnitus even more noticeable.

What should you do?

If you are concerned about your tinnitus you should first see your GP. It can help to find out more about tinnitus from the British Tinnitus Association or RNID (details at the end of this leaflet). It can help to try to not let the tinnitus affect your everyday life. If the tinnitus is troublesome your GP may refer you to see an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist.

The audiology tinnitus clinic

Audiology tinnitus clinic run by audiologists trained in managing tinnitus and accepts referrals from Bedford ENT department and hearing aid clinics. At the tinnitus clinic the audiologist will take a detailed history about your tinnitus and fill in some questionnaires. There will be the opportunity to find out more about tinnitus and discuss management options. Further information will be provided for you to take home.

Therapies for tinnitus

Many people notice their tinnitus when they are in a quiet environment. Sound enrichment can help in these situations by introducing background sounds which distract people from listening to the tinnitus. The sound enrichment may be from sounds around the home such as a fan or radio tuned off station or sound generators which can play pleasant natural sounds such as rain. If the tinnitus is bothersome during the day then an alternative to sound enrichment would be a sound generator which is worn in the ear and makes a quiet rushing sound.

If you have a hearing loss, even if it is a small loss, hearing aids can help because they bring more sound into the ear(s) which tends to make tinnitus less noticeable. They can also reduce the effort required in straining to hear which can have a positive effect on tinnitus.

Tinnitus tends to become less noticeable when people are busy or distracted by other activities so engaging in hobbies and other pleasurable activities can have a beneficial effect on tinnitus.

Finding out more about the hearing system and tinnitus can help bring reassurance and help change your reaction to the tinnitus. Many people find tinnitus is worse when they are worried or tired which can increase the level of anxiety and stress which can make the tinnitus more noticeable leading to more worry. Regular relaxation of the mind and body can help break this cycle.

Medication and tinnitus

There currently isn't a pill which specifically treats tinnitus. Tinnitus is listed as a possible side effect for many medications but most medications need to be taken in very high doses to cause tinnitus. It is unlikely that any prescribed medication is causing or aggravating your tinnitus but if you have concerns speak to your doctor.

Sleep and tinnitus

Many people find tinnitus is more noticeable in a quiet environment which means it can be worse at night. Sound enrichment in the bedroom can help and it is possible to buy pillow speakers if you are worried about disturbing other people. Most adults have trouble sleeping at some stage in their life and further advice is available in the BTA leaflet Good Night – Sleep Tight available online and from the tinnitus clinic.

Sound tolerance

Most people with tinnitus can tolerate moderately noisy surroundings but some people may be disturbed by everyday noises. This is known as hyperacusis and can also occur in people without tinnitus. If sound tolerance is a problem sound therapy can help retrain your sound tolerance. It is recommended that you don't over protect your ears by wearing hearing protection in everyday environments although it is recommended that anyone in a particularly noisy environment uses appropriate hearing protection.

Further information about tinnitus

The British Tinnitus Association www.tinnitus.org.uk provide advice and support about tinnitus. They also have a confidential freephone helpline 0800 018 0527.

The RNID www.tuneouttinnitus.org.uk also provide information and advice about tinnitus and can be contacted on their freephone information line 0808 808 6666.