

TINNITUS (UNWANTED NOISES IN THE EAR)

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus ("TIN-a-tus" or "Tin-EYE-tus") is the perception of sound in the head when no outside sound is present. It is typically referred to as "ringing in the ears," but other forms of sound such as hissing, roaring, pulsing, whooshing, chirping, whistling and clicking have been described.

Tinnitus can occur in one ear or both ears and can be perceived to be occurring inside or outside the ear. Tinnitus can be a symptom of a condition that causes hearing loss, or it can exist without any hearing loss.

Is tinnitus a common problem?

Yes. Almost everyone at one time or another has experienced brief periods of mild ring or other sound in the ear. Some people have more annoying and constant types of tinnitus. One third of all adults report experiencing tinnitus at some time in their lives. Ten percent to 15% of adults have prolonged tinnitus requiring medical evaluation. Prevalence estimates of individuals with tinnitus vary widely, from 7.9 million to more than 37 million.

Is tinnitus a disease?

No. Just as fever or headache accompanies many different illnesses, tinnitus is a symptom common to many problems, both physiological and psychological.

What causes my tinnitus?

Most tinnitus comes from damage to the microscopic endings of the hearing nerve in the inner ear. The health of these nerve endings is important for acute hearing, and injury to them brings on hearing loss and often tinnitus.

Chances are the cause of your tinnitus will remain a mystery. Only when a specific factor is linked to the appearance or disappearance of the tinnitus can a cause be stated with certainty. Blows to the head, large doses of certain drugs such as aspirin, anemia, hypertension, noise exposure, stress, impacted ear wax and certain types of tumors are examples of conditions that might cause tinnitus.

What happens in my head to produce tinnitus?

Although there are many theories about how sounds in the head are produced, the exact process is not known. One thing is certain. Tinnitus is not imaginary.

Why is my tinnitus worse at night?

During the day, the distraction of activities and the sounds around you make your tinnitus less obvious. When your surroundings are quiet, your tinnitus may seem louder and more constant. Fatigue may also make your tinnitus worse.

What should I do about my tinnitus?

Since tinnitus is a symptom, the first step should be to try to diagnose the underlying cause. You should have a medical examination with special attention given to checking for factors sometimes associated with the tinnitus such as blood pressure, kidney function, drug intake, diet and allergies. Your hearing should be evaluated by an audiologist to determine if hearing loss is present.

What is the treatment for tinnitus?

The most effective treatment for tinnitus is to eliminate the underlying cause. Unfortunately, the cause often cannot be identified so, in some cases, the tinnitus itself may need to be treated. Drug therapy, vitamin therapy, biofeedback, hypnosis and tinnitus maskers are types of treatments that have been helpful for some people.

The American Tinnitus Association (ATA) Web site has information on various treatment options. Visit <http://www.ata.org> or write them at PO Box 5, Portland, Oregon 97207.

Will a hearing aid help my tinnitus?

If you have a hearing loss, there is a good chance that a hearing aid will both relieve your tinnitus and help you hear. An audiologist can assist with the selection, fitting and purchase of the most appropriate aid and help with training to use the aid effectively.

Information adapted from the American Speech-Language Hearing Association at www.asha.org and the American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery at www.entnet.org.