

deafness research uk



Managing tinnitus

Treating head noise



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How this leaflet can help

This leaflet has been produced for people who have recently developed tinnitus, or who have experienced symptoms for some time and want basic guidance on how to manage their condition.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is noise heard in the ear or the head that is generated inside the body rather than coming from outside. It is very common and is experienced by one in ten people in the UK. It can affect any age group. Tinnitus often occurs temporarily after exposure to loud noise such as a concert.

Although scientists have not yet identified the exact nature of tinnitus, the problem is believed to involve processes in both the ear and the brain.

Tinnitus can be constant or intermittent and may be experienced in one or both ears or in the head. The perceived loudness can be anything from a whisper to a roar and the noises can vary. It may be a ringing, whistling, buzzing or hissing and can even sound like musical notes.

It is not inevitable that people who have tinnitus will develop a noticeable hearing loss, but the two often go together. Some may already have a hearing loss but be unaware of it.

Tinnitus is a symptom, but it is not a disease or illness as such. It is rarely an indication of a more serious condition although there are exceptions such as Ménière's Disease in which tinnitus is accompanied by hearing loss and balance problems.

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What causes tinnitus?

What follows are just some of the known causes of tinnitus. Many people may not be able to attribute the onset of tinnitus to anything specific. There is much more to learn about what causes tinnitus and more research is needed.

Ageing

Tinnitus can affect people of all ages, but it is more common as people get older. This suggests that tinnitus can be the result of 'wear and tear' in the auditory (hearing) system. Many experts believe that tinnitus could be linked to the gradual loss of the delicate sensory cells, called 'hair' cells, in the inner ear. Whilst tinnitus can be the first obvious sign, such damage can also cause hearing loss.

Loud noise

Depending on the volume and duration, exposure to loud noise can cause tinnitus. Dulled hearing may also be experienced and both symptoms are an indication that some damage has occurred to the auditory system. Although usually temporary to start with, symptoms can become permanent with repeated exposure to loud noise.

Many people get tinnitus as a result of loud noise experienced during military service. Noisy workplaces such as industrial plants and call centres can damage hearing, as can loud music at night clubs, concerts and through MP3 players.

Everyone should try to avoid exposure to excessive noise. Tips for safer listening are available from the Deafness Research UK Information Service.

Other causes

- Some prescribed medications can aggravate or even be toxic to the hearing system and result in tinnitus. It is reported that substances such as alcohol, aspirin and nicotine can also increase symptoms in some people.
- In some cases tinnitus may be caused by an allergic reaction, diabetes, surgery, thyroid problems, earwax, blood circulation problems or injury to the head or neck.
- Middle ear infections can cause discomfort as well as tinnitus and hearing loss. It is important to have an infection treated by a GP. Symptoms will normally clear up completely.
- It is common for tinnitus to begin at times of high stress or after a period of stress, but it is not clear whether stress actually causes tinnitus. Stress, other illness and tiredness can make tinnitus more intrusive, possibly by reducing the person's ability to cope with it.

Further details about the causes of tinnitus are given in our tinnitus factsheet.



Treating tinnitus

Going to your GP



If your tinnitus becomes persistent or starts to bother you, it is advisable to make an appointment with your GP. Although there is no medicine specifically to treat tinnitus, there are treatments available which can help to reduce its impact.

Because there is no simple test for tinnitus, your GP will be guided by the description you give of your symptoms. It is therefore important to tell the GP what the tinnitus is like and make it clear that it is having an impact on your life. Any loss of hearing or other symptoms should also be described. It may help to tell your GP exactly what medication you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs and painkillers, because these may be affecting your tinnitus. The GP will also examine your ears to check for infection or build-up of earwax.

Most GPs are helpful, but some do not have a good understanding of tinnitus and their initial reaction to a patient can be unsympathetic. If you are nervous or uncomfortable about visiting your GP, or if you have a hearing loss, prepare notes in advance, as this will help you give a clear description.

As tinnitus is often accompanied by a hearing loss, your GP may suggest that you have a hearing test. Your GP will then decide with you whether referral to an ENT specialist or consultant in Audiovestibular Medicine (AVM) is appropriate. If you are unhappy with your GP's recommendations, you can seek a second opinion.

At the hospital

You will be given a thorough check, including hearing tests, X-rays, blood tests and often a CT or MRI scan to rule out any obvious cause of the tinnitus that could be corrected medically or surgically. Many of these tests will be done on the day of your appointment or as soon as possible afterwards in order to arrive at a diagnosis and start any possible treatments or therapies.

Although waiting times for hospital appointments following GP referral used to be very long in some parts of the UK, most are now within 18 weeks of the time of referral.

Managing tinnitus

The following treatments have helped some people to manage their tinnitus. You may find that one or a combination of these works for you.

Sound generators

Everyday sounds may mask the tinnitus during the daytime, making it either easier to deal with or completely inaudible so, for some people, tinnitus can become more of a problem during quiet times of the day or at night.

Many people find relief from tinnitus by adding an external competing sound at a constant low level. Having the radio or television on, or the hum of a fan might help to distract from the internal sounds of the tinnitus.

Sound generators produce a constant sound designed to make tinnitus seem less intrusive. These devices appear to offer more benefit when combined with other therapies than when used alone. A behind-the-ear version which looks similar to a hearing aid is available through the NHS. There are also under-the-pillow and bedside versions suitable for use at night. These may be available on the NHS and can also be purchased privately.



Photo: Connexians

Hearing aids

Tinnitus is more common in deaf and hard of hearing people. For these people, a hearing aid may not only help to make external sounds more audible, but may reduce the perceived level of the tinnitus. However, hearing aid levels should not be set too loud as this can actually worsen the tinnitus. Hearing aids are available on the NHS and privately. If tinnitus is present and has not been previously diagnosed and investigated by a hospital specialist, then the dispenser is required to advise the client to seek appropriate medical advice before proceeding with hearing aids.

Psychological treatments

The offer of counselling or psychological treatment does NOT mean that tinnitus is regarded as imaginary. Psychological treatments are now used in a lot of medical settings, e.g. pain clinics, blood pressure clinics, diabetes clinics etc. They are also being used in tinnitus clinics and tinnitus is taken just as seriously as these other problems. Psychological approaches to tinnitus are aimed at helping people become less distressed by tinnitus and so pay less attention to it.

Most NHS audiology departments offer treatment based on a mixture of counselling (which includes education about tinnitus) and sound therapy. Some departments also offer relaxation therapy. In addition, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is increasingly used with people distressed by their tinnitus. People often have worrying thoughts about tinnitus and the things they do to cope are often unhelpful in the long run. In CBT, people are helped to explore their responses to tinnitus and replace unhelpful patterns of thought and behaviour with more helpful alternatives.

Drugs

Anti-depressant medication can form an integral part of a treatment programme for some tinnitus patients. Such drugs do not make tinnitus go away, but they may reduce the distress associated with it so reducing its perceived level.

Self-help

Diet and lifestyle

Relaxation therapy is a useful approach to breaking the cycle of tinnitus, reducing stress levels and helping to restore a regular sleep pattern. Regular exercise makes people feel better generally and so helps lessen the impact of tinnitus. For some people it can help to limit salt intake or avoid foods or drinks which noticeably worsen symptoms.

Complementary therapies

In search of a cure for their tinnitus, many people turn to complementary therapies. Among those most commonly tried are homeopathy, nutritional supplements and acupuncture. There is no hard evidence to support the claims for these treatments, but some patients experience an improvement in their symptoms and, where there is a relaxation element, lower levels of anxiety.

Some complementary therapies may be available through GP surgeries. Alternatively, you should check that your intended therapist has a recognised qualification through the appropriate professional body. Guidance is also available from the Complementary Medical Association: www.the-cma.org.uk.

It is important that you have your tinnitus investigated by a specialist before considering any complementary therapies.



Our Action for Tinnitus Research campaign

Deafness Research UK is the leading research charity for people with hearing problems and supporting research into tinnitus has been a priority since we were founded in 1985.

Advances in research techniques mean that there is a greater chance than ever before of developing new and effective treatments for tinnitus. Some of the world's most eminent tinnitus and hearing scientists are based in the UK and we are able to involve them in our work.

To take advantage of these new opportunities, we have launched our Action for Tinnitus Research campaign to raise funds for tinnitus research and highlight the urgent need for better treatments.

Deafness Research UK is a member of the Association of Medical Research Charities and, as such, operates a rigorous research review process. Each tinnitus research project is assessed by experts for its scientific merit and, importantly, for its chances of producing results that could ultimately improve lives. It is also reviewed by a lay panel of people with tinnitus.

Scientific understanding of tinnitus is growing all the time and there is now a real push within the UK and around the world to apply this knowledge to help the millions of people in the UK and worldwide who have tinnitus. Deafness Research UK is at the forefront of this work.

Deafness Research UK's other work

Deafness Research UK runs a wide-ranging research programme, from identifying the genes that cause different types of deafness to research into glue ear – the commonest cause of hearing loss in pre-school children. The charity is undertaking research to identify the genes for Ménière's disease, a debilitating condition involving tinnitus, vertigo and hearing loss that can strike people in the prime of life, and supports research to find a cure for deafness through regeneration or replacement of hearing cells.

Deafness Research UK Information Service

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To find out more

If this leaflet has not answered all your questions about tinnitus and related problems you can request further information by returning this form or speak to an adviser at the Deafness Research UK Information Service. Please don't forget to fill in your name and address details over the page.

Please send me the following information:

- More about tinnitus
- Tinnitus research and the potential for new treatments
- Losing your hearing
- Reducing exposure to loud noise
- Ménière's Disease
- A list of all Deafness Research UK publications
- Other (please specify).....

Return this form to:

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