

Tinnitus — The Noise in Your Ears

Tinnitus is a ringing, roaring, hissing, or other type of noise in the ear or head. It is a symptom associated with many forms of hearing loss. It can also be a symptom of other health problems. Millions of Americans have tinnitus. Many experience it so severely that it interferes with daily activities. People with severe cases of tinnitus may find it difficult to hear, work, or even sleep. People with tinnitus may also suffer from hyperacusis, an inability to tolerate even moderate level sounds. In most cases it is not a serious problem and may go away on its own.

Tinnitus has many causes. Hearing loss is the most common cause as a result of damage to the microscopic nerve endings in the inner ear. Too much exposure to loud noise can cause noise-induced hearing loss and tinnitus, as can advancing age. More than 200 medicines can cause tinnitus. Other health problems, such as allergies, tumors, and problems in the heart and blood vessels, jaws, and neck can cause tinnitus. If tinnitus persists, especially if it's only on one side or associated with dizziness, medical evaluation is recommended.

Tinnitus with an obvious cause, such as an ear infection, can be treated. For many causes of tinnitus, however, there is no cure, but there are several treatments that may give some relief. Not every treatment works for everyone. Treatments can include:

- Hearing aids. If you have hearing loss, wearing a hearing aid will sometimes reduce head noise, and occasionally cause it to go away. Even a person with a minor hearing deficit may find that hearing aids relieve tinnitus.
- Maskers. Maskers are small electronic devices that use sound to make tinnitus less noticeable. They make the ringing or roaring seem softer. For some people, maskers hide their tinnitus so well they can barely hear it. Listening to static at a low volume on the radio or using a bedside masker can help you sleep.
- Medicine or drug therapy. Some medicines may ease tinnitus.
- Tinnitus retraining therapy. This treatment uses a combination of counseling and maskers. Maskers help to make your tinnitus less noticeable and after a while, some people learn how to avoid thinking about their tinnitus.
- Counseling. People with tinnitus may become depressed. Talking with a counselor may be helpful.
- Relaxing. Learning how to relax is helpful if the noise in your ears frustrates you. Stress makes tinnitus seem worse. Biofeedback can teach voluntary control of breathing, heart rate, muscle tension, and blood pressure through electronic monitoring.

Avoid anything that can make your tinnitus worse. This includes loud noise, smoking, alcohol, caffeine and marijuana. Wear hearing protection if you are exposed to noise at work or from hobbies like hunting or using power tools.

For more information:

American Tinnitus Association, www.ata.org

American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery, www.entnet.org

Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc, www.shhh.org

American Academy of Audiology, www.audiology.org