



Independent Hearing Care Services

Hearability information sheet

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TINNITUS

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a condition where noises are heard in the ears or in the head. Most people will experience some buzzing or ringing in the ears, especially after exposure to loud noise. Although this is a temporary problem for most people, for more than four million people in the UK these noises can be severe and permanent.

What noises do people hear?

The way people perceive tinnitus varies enormously - from just one sound to a mixture of whistling, ringing, buzzing and rushing sounds. The condition is common among deaf and hard of hearing people but it also happens to a small number of hearing people.

What are the noises?

The noises that are heard are not fully understood but are generally considered to be the noises of the internal workings of the ear and the nearby arteries and veins or somewhere along the line from the cochlea to the auditory cortex where irregular electrical signals are being generated, producing perceived sounds.

For people with a hearing loss the explanation is a little more involved. The hearing pathway has a complex filtering system that allows you to 'tune in' to sounds that are important to you – like an early warning system – and 'tune out' sounds that are not important. This system is always working and stops you from being bombarded with sounds. Your brain has a similar system that responds to sounds. Together these systems help to control how you react to sound and set-up a sound threshold. This threshold stops very quiet sounds being picked up over background noise. When you lose some of your hearing, your brain sets the sound threshold lower to compensate for the hearing loss. By doing so you are able to pick up the internal noise levels of the workings of your own ear.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease and there can be many different causes. It can be linked to exposure to loud noise, hearing loss, ear or head injuries, some diseases (ie Meniere's disease) of the ear and some ear infections, or it can be a side effect of some medication. It may be a combination of all or some of these or a person may never have any of these conditions.

How do I cope with tinnitus?

Anyone who starts to get tinnitus or suspects their hearing is damaged should make an appointment to see their family doctor immediately. Usually, the doctor will refer the patient to an audiologist or Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) unit. Here a specialist will be able to rule out more serious middle ear problems and conduct a hearing test to determine whether the problem is linked to a hearing loss. Although tinnitus has no simple 'cure', there are strategies for reducing its impact. A hearing aid audiologist or tinnitus clinic will be able to advise you of these.

Tinnitus can become a real problem during quiet times of day, such as before sleep. A device that provides an external competing sound at a constant low level – known as a sound generator or masker– can help to distract from the internal sounds of the tinnitus. Hearing aids can be modified to incorporate a sound generator that makes an appropriate suppressing sound if the amplification of the aid is not enough to reduce the tinnitus level.

For people without a hearing loss there are behind-the-ear sound generators (similar to hearing aids in appearance), which also produce a low-level ‘white noise’. Both are widely used and available through the NHS and Hearability. Some people also find the introduction of a pleasant background noise such as the radio provides a distraction from the tinnitus.

Other treatments include Tinnitus Retraining Therapy (TRT), a special programme of structured counselling sessions that, in conjunction with the use of a sound generator, helps those affected to adapt to the condition.

Many people find it useful to join a support group to talk about their situation with others who are experiencing similar difficulties. This can increase self-esteem and reduce stress.

Should I change my lifestyle?

Improving the circulation through exercise and a good diet can play a major part in controlling tinnitus. Decreasing salt intake and avoiding stimulants such as coffee, tea, fizzy drinks, spicy foods, citrus fruit and tobacco can also help. Relaxation therapy is a useful approach to breaking the cycle of tinnitus, reducing the stress levels that are often associated with tinnitus and helping to restore a regular sleep pattern.

Are there any alternative treatments?

Some people affected by tinnitus use a variety of alternative treatments to control their tinnitus. Some of the treatments used include acupuncture, homeopathy and vitamin supplements. The most widely used alternative treatment for tinnitus is Ginkgo Biloba, a herbal supplement that is widely available in health food shops and alternative health stores.

The future

The search for a medical solution to combat tinnitus continues, but the use of the tinnitus ‘maskers’ and tinnitus retraining therapy have improved the outlook for many people.

There is a surgical method that can stop the tinnitus sounds, by implanting small electrodes in the cochlea and stimulating it with small electrical charges (cochlear implant). Unfortunately this is only possible for those who have a total hearing loss, as the procedure destroys the hearing mechanism. Generally surgery is not recommended for tinnitus.

Further information

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