



Self Help for Hard of Hearing People



The official website for Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (Australia) Inc

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Information Sheets

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Information Sheet Number 7

TINNITUS

Tinnitus is the experience of hearing sounds which have no external source. Some people call it 'head noises' or 'ringing in the ears'. It can range from a high-pitched hissing to ringing to a clicking or buzzing – and may even be felt as a pulsation.

In many cases tinnitus is associated with some degree of hearing loss, but this may not always be so. Its presence is an indication of some damage or malfunction of the hearing mechanism.

WHAT CAUSES TINNITUS?

Tinnitus is not a disease in itself, but a symptom. Almost anything which causes damage or irritation to the cochlea, the organ of hearing in the inner ear, or to the hearing nerve, may result in the generation of false signals which are interpreted by the brain as sound.

Most common causes are:

- **Noise trauma** – damage to the inner ear from exposure to very loud sounds such as shooting, chain saws, aircraft engines, or excessively amplified music.
- **Physical injury** – a blow to the head, or changes in barometric pressure during air travel or diving.
- **Ear diseases or infection** – otosclerosis (immobilisation of the small bones in the middle ear) and Meniere's Disease (a build up of fluid in the inner ear) can both cause tinnitus.
- **Other causes** can be allergies, tumours, diabetes, thyroid problems, and circulatory changes.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

It is important that you consult an otolaryngologist (an ear, nose and throat specialist) to determine whether there is a medical condition which should be treated. If a specific cause can be found, the tinnitus might be reduced or eliminated.

Unfortunately, this does not often happen – there is usually no cure. There are, however, a number of things which you can do to lessen the severity of the tinnitus. The sounds are often made worse by lifestyle factors, and you should be aware of the following:

- Loud noise – many people will find their tinnitus is aggravated by noise and should avoid noisy situations or wear ear protection if practicable.
- Stress and fatigue – these should be avoided as much as possible and always try to get adequate sleep and relaxation.
- Medication – tinnitus can be a side effect of some medication – anti-inflammatory drugs, quinine, and aspirin among many others. If you are on any medication, you should check with your doctor in case an alternative treatment is indicated.
- Lowering salt intake – this plus a balanced diet are beneficial.
- Daily exercise – this will improve circulation and may help. Sport, gardening – anything you enjoy is a good distraction.
- Blood pressure – your blood pressure should be checked and measures taken to lower it if necessary.
- Nicotine – you are strongly advised not to smoke.
- Caffeine – coffee, tea, cola drinks and chocolate all contain caffeine. Try eliminating these from your diet for a one-month trial period to determine whether caffeine is having an adverse effect on you.
- Alcohol and other drugs – most people with tinnitus find that it is aggravated following any form of intoxication.

OTHER APPROACHES

Hearing Aids – in some cases, use of a hearing aid is beneficial. By enhancing appreciation of normal sound, the unpleasant tinnitus sounds become less apparent.

Tinnitus Maskers and Masking Techniques – tinnitus is noticed more in a quiet environment. It can be helpful to play a soft radio or tape in the background, especially when trying to go to sleep. A small pillow speaker is available.

A modified hearing aid which can be tuned to make sounds of varying pitch and loudness which suppresses or 'whites out' the tinnitus noise. Response is individual and a trial is essential. For some people a combined masker/hearing aid may help.

Counselling/Relaxation Therapy – some people with tinnitus find it difficult to divert their attention from the noise and it begins to dominate their thinking. Recognising that the problem is real and may be permanent, a cognitive-behavioural approach can help sufferers to place the problem in perspective and learn to cope more effectively with their reactions to it.

Biofeedback Training or Retraining Therapy – a technique by which it is possible to learn to control or retrain bodily functions or mental approaches with the help of training professionals.

Jaw Re-alignment – poor alignment of the jaw can cause local stress leading to tinnitus. Have this checked by your dentist.

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The ATA produces a newsletter and leaflets as well as running a telephone counselling service. The Head Office above can tell you the location of your nearest Tinnitus Self-Help group.