

Tinnitus

Tinnitus is a noise that is heard, when no such external noise is present. About 17–20% of Australians suffer from tinnitus, which can vary from being mild to severe.

Rather than being a disease or health problem in itself, tinnitus is actually a symptom of an issue in a person's auditory system, which involves both the ears and the brain. While it is commonly reported with hearing loss, it is also possible for normal hearing people to experience tinnitus.

People may experience tinnitus as:

- Ringing
- Buzzing
- Humming
- Whistling
- Roaring

Major causes of tinnitus

- Exposure to loud noise at unsafe levels
- Stress or trauma
- Ototoxic (ear damaging) medications
- Loss of hearing associated with degeneration of the hair cells in the cochlea (age-related hearing loss)
- Meniere's disease
- Injury or abnormality of the middle ear system comprising the ear drum and the tiny bones of the ear (e.g. ear infection, perforation of the ear drum)

Prevention of tinnitus

Reducing exposure to loud noise by using hearing protection when doing activities such as mowing the lawn, attending concerts, working around loud machines, and operating firearms

Reducing the volume when listening through headphones

Seeking advice from your GP as to which medications can cause or exacerbate tinnitus

Effects of tinnitus

- Distress (can be extreme at times)
- Anxiety
- Sleep disturbance
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritation

Sometimes people may experience suicidal thoughts in the early stages of tinnitus. It is important for people to seek appropriate assistance from a psychologist or GP if these thoughts occur.

Managing tinnitus

There are various ways you can manage it and they include:

- Accepting tinnitus as part of your life. Being able to move on with your life is a big first step.
- Keeping busy. When the mind is occupied, you are spending less time thinking about your tinnitus.
- Exploring stress reduction or relaxation techniques. Stress will almost always make your tinnitus worse. Activities may include: meditation, exercise, yoga or massage.
- Using noise maskers when in a quiet environment. Turning on a fan, opening a window, or downloading a noise masking app may help distract you from your tinnitus.
- It is suspected certain foods make tinnitus worse. Having less caffeine [tea, coffee, chocolate or cola], quinine [tonic water] and alcohol may help. You do not have to avoid these items altogether. Just be aware they may temporarily worsen your tinnitus. Carbohydrate-rich meals, for example pasta, can have a calming or sedating effect, which can be helpful. However, give yourself time to digest your meal before you go to bed to avoid disturbed sleep.
- Quitting smoking - smoking narrows the blood vessels that supply vital oxygen to your ears and their sensory cells.
- Keeping physically and mentally active - engaging in exercise, hobbies or interests. Even if your tinnitus prevents you from working, keep as active as possible. Do not withdraw from life.

Things to remember

- You should see your doctor if you think you have tinnitus.
- There are a variety of treatments that may help relieve your symptoms.
- The more attention you pay to your tinnitus, the harder it is to become used to it.

Where to get help

- Audiologist
- General Practitioner/Ear Nose &
- Throat Specialist
- Tinnitus Association of Victoria
<http://tinnitus.org.au>

