

Hyperacusis and Sensitivity to Sounds

What is hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis can be broadly defined as an increased sensitivity to normal, environmental sounds. Sufferers generally find everyday noises to be too loud, while loud noises can cause pain or discomfort. It is caused by damage to the inner ear, usually through the ageing process or through continued exposure to loud noise. It most commonly affects both ears but can affect one ear only. Hyperacusis is frequently associated with tinnitus. While many people experience sensitivity to sounds, true hyperacusis is rare, affecting around 1 in 50,000 people.

What are the symptoms?

- Ordinary, everyday sounds are considered very loud
- Loud noises cause pain or distress
- Loud noises can worsen intolerance to sound for some time
- Your own voice sounds loud or distorted
- Worsening tinnitus

What causes it?

- Deterioration in hearing associated with the ageing process
- Exposure to one-off loud noises (e.g. a gunshot or explosion)
- Head injuries
- A slap on the ear

- Chronic noise exposure (e.g. working around heavy machinery)
- Paralysis of the facial nerve
- Certain medications



How is it diagnosed?

There is no objective test used for diagnosing hyperacusis, rather, an Audiologist will use a range of subjective tests to determine whether the person has a lower than average tolerance to sound.

How is it treated?

Unfortunately, there is no specific corrective or surgical treatment for hyperacusis. For most, hyperacusis is not troublesome, and with counselling from an Audiologist or medical specialist, sufferers may be able to manage their condition successfully. For some however, this may not suffice and they may need to seek further sources of treatment.

How is it managed?

- Reintroducing everyday sounds as soon as possible. This method is known as desensitisation and is essentially training your brain to become more tolerant to noises you are uncomfortable with.
- Wearing hearing protection in loud environments, e.g. noise from machinery and loud music.
- Asking people to lower their voices when speaking to you.
- Tinnitus Retraining Therapy [TRT] - a form of habituation therapy designed to help effectively manage tinnitus.
- There is no evidence of TRT being able to reduce or eliminate tinnitus, rather it provides an ability to better cope with the condition. This therapy also helps hyperacusis sufferers as it helps reduce sensitivity to noise through a set of 'noise generators' that are worn on the ears like a hearing aid.
- Should you experience any anxiety associated with tinnitus or hyperacusis, talking with someone about your symptoms can be useful. Seeking advice from a counsellor or psychologist can help with developing strategies that you can use when experiencing anxiety.
- If necessary, your GP/ENT specialist may prescribe a short-term dose of sleep medication.

Who can help?

- Your GP
- Audiologist
- Ear, Nose and Throat specialist
- Tinnitus Association of Victoria
<http://tinnitus.org.au>

Reference

1. Medindia. Hyperacusis. [Image on internet], 2011 [updated 2017 Oct 5; cited 2017 Nov 1]. Available from: <https://www.medindia.net/index.asp>