

Tinnitus

Tinnitus is an abnormal noise, which is heard but does not come from outside the ear. Noises heard include ringing, whistles, roaring, machine type noises etc. It is very common. It can be either constant or intermittent. It can vary in loudness and character from time to time. People affected usually describe it being more prominent in quiet surroundings or at times when they are tired or depressed. Tinnitus can be present without any other ear problem. It may also be associated with forms of hearing loss. For example, it is most commonly associated with the hearing loss of older age (presbycusis). Tinnitus is therefore most common in older people.

What Causes Tinnitus?

In most people with tinnitus, the cause of the noise is not known. The ear nerve and/or the hearing parts of the brain in some unknown way do not function properly and noises are heard. Most people with tinnitus do not have any other ear disease. The commonest ear problem that people with tinnitus may have is the hearing loss of older age. Some other uncommon problems may produce tinnitus such as the following.

- Meniere's disease. This is tinnitus associated with deafness and imbalance.
- Noise induced deafness. This is produced by exposure to loud noise.
- General causes such as fever, and uncommon diseases of blood vessels and nerves.
- An uncommon side effect of some drugs such as Aspirin or Quinine.
- Other ear diseases such as otosclerosis.

Any underlying ear problems are usually ruled out by ear examinations. Referral to an Ear Nose and Throat specialist may be required if tinnitus becomes persistent or troublesome or an underlying ear disease is suspected.

Treatment

Understanding the problem will often help. Knowing there is no serious ear disease often reassures people. It sometimes goes away and in many people the situation improves. With time the tinnitus may become less obtrusive as people adjust to it. A radio or personal stereo are often used to distract from the tinnitus noise and reduce its intrusiveness. It may be more of a problem only at certain times of day. For example, it is often most noticeable when quiet and trying to sleep. If kept awake at night, a radio with a time switch may help to mask out the noise until you drop off to sleep. In some people who are depressed, an antidepressant drug may help.

Sometimes wearing a hearing aid will help to mask out the noise of tinnitus. This boosts the normal sounds, which may 'override' the tinnitus noise. They may also relieve any accompanying deafness. Tinnitus maskers (noise generators) are sometimes tried. These are similar to hearing aids but produce what is called white noise that also helps to mask out the tinnitus.

