

Common Questions about Tinnitus

I Sometimes Hear Ringing in My Ears. Is This Unusual?

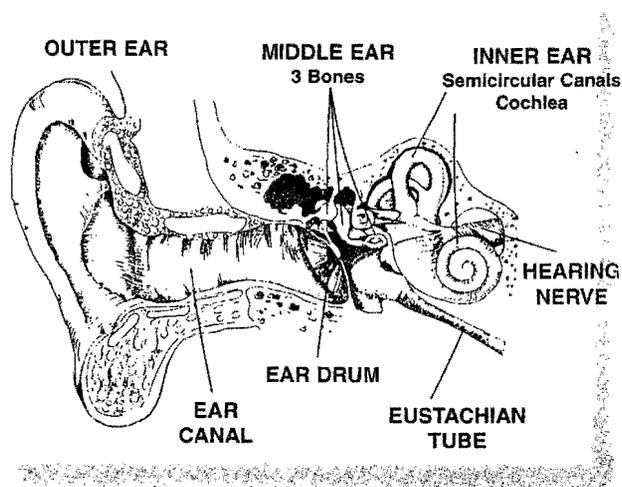
Not at all. Tinnitus is the name for these head noises, and they are very common. Nearly 36 million Americans suffer from this discomfort. Tinnitus may come and go, or you may be aware of a continuous sound. It can vary in pitch from a low roar to a high squeal or whine, and you may hear it in one or both ears. When the ringing is constant, it can be annoying and distracting. More than seven million people are afflicted so severely that they cannot lead normal lives.

Can other people hear the noise in my ears?

Not usually, but sometimes they are able to hear a certain type of tinnitus. This is called objective tinnitus, and it is caused either by abnormalities in blood vessels around the outside of the ear or by muscle spasms, which may sound like clicks or crackling inside the middle ear.

What Causes Tinnitus?

There are many causes for subjective tinnitus, the noise only you can hear. Some causes are not serious (a small plug of wax in the ear canal might cause temporary tinnitus). Tinnitus can also be a symptom of more serious middle ear problems such as infection, a hole in the eardrum, an accumulation of fluid, or stiffening (otosclerosis) of the middle ear bones.



Tinnitus may also be caused by allergy, high or low blood pressure (blood circulation problems), a tumor, diabetes, thyroid problems, injury to the head or neck, and a variety of other causes including medications such as anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, sedatives/antidepressants, and aspirin. (If you take aspirin and your ears ring, talk to your doctor about dosage in relation to your size.)

Treatment will be quite different in each case. It is important to see an otolaryngologist to investigate the cause of your tinnitus so that the best treatment can be determined.

What's most common?

For all ages:

- Most tinnitus comes from damage to the microscopic endings of the hearing nerve in the inner ear. The health of these nerve endings is important for acute hearing, and injury to them brings on hearing loss and often tinnitus.

If you're older:

- Advancing age is generally accompanied by a certain amount of hearing nerve impairment and tinnitus.

If you're younger:

- Exposure to loud noises is probably the leading cause of tinnitus and often damages hearing as well.

What Is the Treatment?

In most cases, there is no specific treatment for ear and head noise. If your otolaryngologist finds a specific cause of your tinnitus, he/she may be able to eliminate the noise. But, this determination may require extensive testing including X-rays, balance tests, and laboratory work.

However, most causes cannot be identified. Occasionally, medicine may help the noise. The medications used are varied, and several may be tried to see if they help.

The following list of do's and don'ts can help lessen the severity of tinnitus.

1. Avoid exposure to loud sounds and noises.
2. Get your blood pressure checked. If it is high, get your doctor's help to control it.
3. Decrease your intake of salt. Salt impairs blood circulation.
4. Avoid stimulants such as coffee, tea, cola, and tobacco.
5. Exercise daily. It improves your circulation.
6. Get adequate rest. Avoid fatigue.
7. Stop worrying about the noise. Recognize your head noise as an annoyance and learn to ignore (see back panel) it as much as possible.

What Can Help Me Cope?

Concentration and Relaxation Exercises

Concentration and relaxation techniques can help to control muscle groups and circulation throughout the body. The increased relaxation and circulation achieved by these exercises can reduce the intensity of tinnitus in some patients.

Masking

Tinnitus is usually more bothersome in quiet surroundings. A competing sound at a constant low level, such as a ticking clock or radio static (white noise), may mask the tinnitus and make it less noticeable. Products that generate white noise are also available through catalogs and specialty stores.

Tinnitus maskers can be combined within hearing aids. They emit a competitive but pleasant sound that can distract you from the head noise. Some people find that a tinnitus masker may even suppress the head noise for several hours after it is used. But, this is not true for all users.

Hearing Aids

If you have a hearing loss, a hearing aid(s) may reduce head noise while you are wearing it and sometimes cause it to go away temporarily. It is important not to set the hearing aid at excessively loud levels, as this can worsen the tinnitus in some cases. However, a thorough trial before purchase of a hearing aid is advisable if your primary purpose is the relief of tinnitus.

Summary

Prior to any treatment of tinnitus or head noise, it is important that you have a thorough examination and evaluation by your otolaryngologist. An essential part of your treatment will be your understanding of tinnitus and its causes.

