

# Patient Information

## Tinnitus

Ears, Nose and Throat Department



## What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is an awareness of noise in your ears. Some people hear tinnitus in one ear, some in both and others in the centre of their head. Some people experience tinnitus as coming from outside of their heads.

Tinnitus may be just one sound, or a wide range of sounds which can change. Common descriptions include buzzing, ringing, humming and high-pitched noises. Generally, the type of sound that you hear does not indicate what is causing the tinnitus or predict how long it will last for. Some people hear the sound continuously, and other people find that they become more aware of it, or it becomes louder in certain situations, such as when they are feeling stressed or when they are in a very quiet environment (for example, when trying to go to sleep at night).

## What causes tinnitus?

Most cases of tinnitus are linked to hearing loss caused by damage to the inner ear, such as through normal ageing or exposure to loud noise. This type of hearing loss is called **sensorineural**. Less commonly, tinnitus is linked to hearing loss caused by a blockage or ear condition that affects the outer or middle ear and stops sound waves from passing into the inner ear. This type of hearing loss is called **conductive**. Ear-related conditions that can be associated with tinnitus include:

- A build-up of ear wax.
- A perforated (torn) eardrum.
- Ear infections.
- Glue ear.
- Otosclerosis (abnormal bone growth inside the ear).
- Meniere's disease (a disorder of the inner ear).
- Neurological disorders including acoustic neuroma, which is a non-cancerous growth that affects the hearing nerve.

Sometimes, but uncommonly, tinnitus can be linked to other medical conditions:

- Head or neck injuries.
- Cardiovascular disorders, especially high blood pressure.
- Metabolic disorders including hypothyroidism and diabetes.
- Certain medications, called ototoxic drugs, that are used to treat serious illnesses, such as cancer.

For some people, tinnitus doesn't appear to be linked to any particular cause.

## Hearing loss

People who experience tinnitus may also have some hearing loss. Although there is no direct link between the two, managing the hearing loss often helps to manage the tinnitus as well.

## **Will you need any tests?**

Sometimes, we may suggest that you should be seen by an ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon or an audiovestibular (hearing and balance) doctor, so that further examination and tests can be arranged. You should tell your doctor if the noise you hear is:

- 'Pulsatile' - sounds like your heartbeat. You can compare it to your pulse to see if they match.
- Just in one ear.
- Associated with other symptoms, such as constant pain in the ear, discharge or repeated ear infection, dizzy spells or problems with your balance.

## **Self-help techniques**

There are many simple things that can help you to manage tinnitus. Your audiologist or tinnitus specialist may support you with one or more of these things, but you can also try them without professional support:

- Learn more about tinnitus – understanding what tinnitus is, what causes it, how common it is and how you can manage it can be reassuring. See the back of this leaflet for some useful websites.
- Learn to relax – stress can sometimes worsen tinnitus, so knowing how to reduce your stress levels can help you to manage tinnitus.
- Use calming music and sounds to help take your mind off tinnitus.
- Chat to others with tinnitus – sharing experiences and tips with others who have tinnitus can be really useful.
- Let your family and friends know how tinnitus affects you, so they can better understand and know how to support you.
- Take steps to improve your general health – having a well balanced diet and taking regular exercise will help your overall wellbeing and may help you to cope with tinnitus more easily.
- Follow tips to help you sleep – if tinnitus is affecting your sleep, simple steps like getting up at the same time each day and 'winding down' at least an hour before bed may help.

## **Tinnitus and anxiety or depression**

Tinnitus often becomes much harder to manage when people are feeling down, depressed, stressed or very anxious, be it because of the tinnitus or for other reasons. There is evidence that treating underlying anxiety and depression can help in treating tinnitus. See the back cover for details about the NHS mood self-assessment questionnaire.

