

Tinnitus: The Facts

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What is Tinnitus?

Tinnitus affects over 360,000 Canadians. Individuals with tinnitus perceive sounds that do not exist in the external environment. Tinnitus can take the form of buzzing or ringing in the head or ears. However, individuals report a wide range of sounds, for varying durations and at varying intensities. Sometimes the sounds are accompanied by pressure or pain in or around the ear or by extra-sensitive hearing. The impact of tinnitus can range from annoying to debilitating.

While tinnitus is often associated with hearing loss, many people with normal hearing are also affected by it. Tinnitus is invisible and difficult to explain to others, adding to the frustration of those affected by it. Causes are varied; some are external, others internal.

What Causes Tinnitus?

Tinnitus can be triggered by stress or shock, physical or emotional. Stress to the nervous or auditory system from noise exposure (such as loud concerts, industrial equipment or gun shots), trauma to the hearing mechanism (such as head injuries) and stress due to depression or anxiety are all potential causes. In rare cases, tinnitus can be caused by medical disorders such as acoustic neuroma (a tumor affecting the brain and inner ear) or otosclerosis (a degenerative condition affecting the lower part of the skull which can lead to hearing loss). Restricted blood flow to the ear has also been suggested as a possible cause. Meniere's disease is a form of tinnitus characterized by episodes of subjective, noise, dizziness, or vertigo; hearing can also be affected.

People with tinnitus may find that caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, aspirin, and some other drugs, makes their tinnitus temporarily worse. Other factors such as high-salt diets, stress, fatigue, loud noises, and even quiet environments also contribute in some persons to heightened levels of tinnitus.

Treating Tinnitus

For the majority of persons with tinnitus, the symptoms never go away. However, there are ways to cope. In some cases, it may even possible to significantly diminish the symptoms. Here are some methods for dealing with tinnitus*; please note that none of these options is effective for everyone:

- **Hearing Aids**
For persons with hearing loss, hearing aids increase the ability to hear background sounds and as a result may lessen awareness of the tinnitus.

- **Maskers**
‘Maskers’ are worn like hearing aids, but instead of amplifying external sound these devices produce a flow of sound similar to that of a fan. The volume is either set to ‘mask’, or cover over the tinnitus or it is set to blend with it.
- **Tinnitus Retraining Therapy**
Tinnitus retraining therapy was developed by Dr. Jastrboff and Dr. Hazell in the late 1980’s. It essentially combines the techniques used in masking with relaxation therapy (see below).
- **Medication**
Prescription medication, such as anti-depressants, can be useful in managing the most disturbing symptoms of tinnitus, especially sleep disruption, anxiety and depression. This medication has no direct effect on the tinnitus itself, but by reducing fatigue and anxiety, it can aid in reducing the intensity of serious forms of tinnitus.
- **Relaxation Therapy**
Relaxation therapy helps to take the person’s mind off the noise, and focus it on something else. Activities linked to relaxation therapy, such as yoga, tai-chi and meditation, tend to reduce stress, and lead to new coping methods.
- **Vitamins and Supplements**
In the case of persons who have a nutritional deficiency, vitamin and mineral supplements, while having no direct effect on the tinnitus itself, may improve general health and act to make tinnitus less distressing.

* Please note this list is not exhaustive and is not a substitute for medical advice. It is intended for educational purposes only. Anyone experiencing symptoms of tinnitus should consult a medical doctor to ensure that the symptoms are not the result of a more serious underlying condition and that proper treatment is received.

Sources

Rezen, Susan V. and Carl Hausman. *Coping with Hearing Loss: A guide for Adults and their Families*. New Jersey: Barricade Books, 1993.

The Tinnitus Association of Canada
• <http://www.kadis.com/ta/tinnitus.htm>

The Canadian Tinnitus and Hyperacusis Centre
• <http://canadiantinn.com>

Ménière’s Disease Information and Research
• <http://www.menieres-disease.ca/tinnitus.htm>

Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists
• <http://www.caslpa.ca>

Canadian Academy of Audiology
• <http://www.canadianaudiology.ca>