

What Causes Tinnitus (Noise in the Ears)?

Is ringing in the ears a common problem?

Yes it is. Tinnitus (a sound or ringing noise in the ears or head) is a very common condition. 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?

Usually not, but sometimes your doctor may be able to hear and detect the tinnitus. This is called objective tinnitus, and it is usually caused by abnormalities in blood vessels or by muscle spasms, which may sound like clicks or crackling inside the middle ear.

What causes tinnitus?

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 hearing, and injury to them brings on hearing loss and the accompanying tinnitus. Older patients have some degree of hearing nerve impairment and tinnitus. If you are younger, exposure to loud noise is probably the leading cause of tinnitus and often damages hearing as well.

Some other causes of tinnitus can occur, such as ear wax lodged next to the eardrum. Tinnitus can also be a symptom of stiffening of the middle ear bones (otosclerosis). Tinnitus may also be caused by blood circulation problems, a tumor, diabetes, injury to the head or neck and a variety of medications. Common medications that may cause tinnitus are aspirin, sedatives, and some antibiotics. If you take aspirin and your ears ring, talk to your doctor.

What is the treatment?

In most cases, the tinnitus is not due to an easily correctable condition. It is usually due to hearing nerve degeneration, a process that is not well understood. This is called sensorineural tinnitus. There is no known cure for this type of common tinnitus.

What does help?

Avoid excessive stress. Stress will make the perception of the noise much more intense. Masking is helpful. Tinnitus is more bothersome in quiet surroundings. A competing sound at a constant low level, such as radio static, will often mask the tinnitus and make it less noticeable. Products that generate white noise are also available through catalogs and specialty stores. Hearing aids are often helpful, and serve as a masker for the tinnitus. A trial before a hearing aid purchase is always advisable. Tinnitus maskers are a specific device to wear in the ear to produce low level noise. Some people find they are effective for suppressing the tinnitus while they are in use.

General Dos and Don'ts:

- Avoid loud noise exposure
- Get your blood pressure checked
- Avoid caffeine (coffee, tea, cola)
- Exercise daily
- Get adequate rest
- If your doctor has found you have sensorineural (hearing nerve) tinnitus, stop worrying about the noise. It is not dangerous.

For more information contact:

American Tinnitus Association

P.O. Box 5

Portland, Oregon 97207-0005

This organization can provide additional information and support.

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