Tinnitus (Noises in the Ear)

What is Tinnitus?
Tinnitus is noise from inside the ear or head that only the person who has the tinnitus can hear. The noises can be described as ringing, buzzing, humming, hissing, popping, clicking, whistling or roaring.
Tinnitus can be constant or may come and go. The noises can occur at different pitches and loudness levels and may change from day to day.

How Common is Tinnitus?
More than one million Canadians suffer from severe tinnitus, and many will go to a doctor for their tinnitus. It is estimated that one in every five people have some degree of this problem, and one in every twenty people with tinnitus have trouble sleeping.

What Causes Tinnitus?
There are many reasons for noises in the ear, but often the cause of tinnitus cannot be found. Some possibilities are listed below:

- hearing loss
- exposure to loud noise
- head injury
- middle ear disease
- wax pressing on the eardrum
- twitching of middle ear muscles
- high cholesterol
- high blood pressure
- some medications (e.g., aspirin, Quinine)
- allergies
- Meniere’s disease
- Multiple Sclerosis
- certain types of tumors
- vitamin or mineral deficiencies

Getting Help
If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Audiologist (R.Aud). No referral is necessary. To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTHLink Alberta - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Inquire at a Public Health Centre
- Look for a registered audiologist. Check the Yellow Pages or Canpages for listings under ‘Audiologist’.
• thyroid problems
• jaw problems
• stress
• IV antibiotics
• chemotherapy drugs
• antidepressants
• food additives

Is There a Relationship Between Tinnitus and Hearing Loss?

There is a strong connection between tinnitus and hearing loss. Many people with hearing loss complain of tinnitus. People with tinnitus should have their hearing tested by an audiologist to see if they have hearing loss.

Can a Doctor Help with Tinnitus?

A doctor can check for medical problems that may be causing tinnitus or making it worse. If the cause of the tinnitus can be found, it may be treated and there may be some relief. Although a specific cause of the tinnitus is often not found, it is helpful to know that it is rarely a serious medical problem. Some medications may make tinnitus worse or better. Talk to a doctor if the tinnitus gets worse after you start a new medication. A doctor may also prescribe other medications to help you cope with the stress of tinnitus.

Is There Anything More That Can be Done for Tinnitus?

It is common to be upset and irritated by tinnitus. According to a survey by the American Tinnitus Association, about 78% of people seeking medical help for their tinnitus are told “there’s nothing that can be done to help; you’ll just have to live with it”. This is not necessarily true.

Try to cover up the tinnitus:

Many people find that their tinnitus is less noticeable in noisy places because outside noises are easier to tolerate than noise in their head. Any of the following may provide some relief:

• hearing aid (for people with hearing loss)
• tinnitus masker (a device worn in the ear that produces a hissing noise)
• bedside masker (makes a noise to help people sleep)
• radio or television noise
• radio tuned to static
• electric fan noise
• recordings of noise or environmental sounds

Habituation therapy (also known as Tinnitus Retraining Therapy or TRT):

The goal of the therapy is to induce habituation or to allow the patient to become accustomed to their tinnitus. The two strategies that are used should be addressed together (sequentially) for more effective treatment.
The first strategy is to remove any negative thought or fears that may be brought on with tinnitus. This can be done through counseling and patient education with a goal to at least reduce the patient’s reaction to any perceived tinnitus. Having a medical examination and hearing assessment with an audiologist to rule out a medical basis for the tinnitus will also relieve the fears for the individual suffering from tinnitus.

Some people suggest that the second strategy can only be accomplished after successful implementation of the first strategy. The second strategy to remove tinnitus from a conscious thought process is done through ‘sound’ therapy. In this kind of therapy, noise is always in the background. If noise is always present, the brain may begin to treat noise and tinnitus the same. As the listener tunes out the background noise, the tinnitus becomes less noticeable. This reduced detectability is an on-going therapy over a long duration in order to achieve retraining of the tinnitus signal processing mechanism.

Ask an audiologist about this therapy.

**Alternative treatments:**

Some people may find relief through acupuncture, herbal remedies, hypnosis or biofeedback training.

**Dental treatment:**

People who have jaw problems or grind their teeth may find that dental treatment helps with tinnitus.

**What Can Make Tinnitus More Bothersome or Worse Than Usual?**

- **Foods:** licorice, sultana raisins, honey, raspberries, apricots, oranges, almonds, cashews, olives, ice cream, peas, beans, tomatoes
- **Alcohol:** red wine, grain-based alcohol
- **Caffeinated drinks:** tea, coffee, cola
- **Other drinks:** root beer, tonic water
- **Flavorings:** wintergreen, raspberry, strawberry, peach, nutty, apricot, pineapple
- **Tobacco products**
- **Seasonings:** salt, black pepper, paprika, dried thyme/sage, curry powder, oregano, cumin, cinnamon, cayenne, turmeric, rosemary, Worcestershire sauce, dill, ginger, chives, cloves
- **Stress and fatigue**
- **Exposure to loud sounds**
- **Some medications**
- **High blood pressure**

**Additional Resources**

- Canada Tinnitus Foundation: www.findthecurenow.org
- American Tinnitus Association: www.ata.org

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