



## **What is tinnitus?**

Tinnitus is a sound you hear inside your head or ears. Sometimes it's buzzing or ringing, other people hear a whooshing or humming sound. It can be constant or it can come and go. It can occur in one ear or both. Sometimes it keeps time with your heartbeat or some other rhythm.

Tinnitus can affect anyone at any time. Some people hardly notice it, others find it upsetting but there are things you can do to help prevent it, and to treat it if it does happen. In most cases tinnitus improves or even goes away with time because the brain 'forgets' it's listening to the sound.

## **What causes it?**

The brain listens to all the sounds going on around us and then decides which ones it wants us to listen to. Normally it ignores all the stuff it thinks isn't important – clocks ticking, for example, or traffic. Have you noticed how some people who live under aeroplane flight paths or next to busy roads don't seem to notice the noise? That's because their brains are bored with listening to those particular noises so they just ignore them until they become unimportant. It's called 'habituation'.

When something new happens the brain has to think about that instead. Perhaps we're worried about something or we've got a problem with our hearing. While the brain is figuring out what's happened, it sometimes forgets to cancel out sounds or it focuses on certain noises by mistake. Sometimes silence makes tinnitus worse, for other people noisy environments trigger their tinnitus.

## **Is it common?**

Yes - 10%-15% of the population experience tinnitus at some point. Most are not bothered by it and find that it goes away by itself.

## **Am I going deaf?**

No! Tinnitus is sometimes caused by your ears being blocked by a cold or ear wax, but it doesn't cause deafness. If you think one of these is your problem, see your doctor and you can decide which treatment is best for you.

Many DJs, pop stars and producers have tinnitus because they have been exposed to a lot of loud noise, which can damage your hearing. Lots of them wear hearing protection to prevent this damage, and it's a good idea for you to wear ear plugs too when you go to a gig or a club.



### **Is there a cure?**

Because tinnitus isn't a disease, there isn't a 'cure' but there are loads of things you can do to make it better or even encourage it to go away.

Because everyone's tinnitus is different, the treatments are different too.

You can talk with your doctor, family and friends and work out what things would best help. For most people, tinnitus goes away by itself as the brain habituates.

### **Should I wear a hearing aid?**

It isn't usually necessary. If you have lost some hearing, an audiologist will be able to talk to you about whether a hearing aid would help your hearing and your tinnitus.

### **Can I encourage my brain to listen to something other than the tinnitus?**

Sometimes a quiet noise in the background can help, perhaps a fan, the radio or music. Whatever you choose, make sure you play it at a quieter level than your tinnitus so your brain can choose to listen to the more interesting sound instead of the tinnitus.

### **My tinnitus gets worse at exam time.**

If you've had a hard day at school or college, are having problems with friends or family or are stressed over exams, tinnitus can seem worse.

If you're worried the silence of exam rooms may cause problems, talk to your teacher, there may be simple ways to improve your surroundings. Learning to relax – perhaps finding a quiet place to think or listen to a little quiet music – can help too.

### **Sometimes I can't hear what's going on in class.**

It's important your teacher knows you sometimes can't hear properly so he or she will know you're trying hard, rather than looking like you're not interested. Perhaps you can discuss with him or her ways to make it easier for you to hear in class.



### **Sometimes I can't sleep because my tinnitus bothers me.**

There are lots of things to try. Watching TV, playing computer games or catching up with your friends online just before you sleep means your brain is over stimulated so when you lie down it's still wide awake.

Doing something quiet before you go to bed, like reading a book, may help your brain prepare for sleep.

Learning to relax properly is one of the best ways to help yourself. Focussing on your breathing by breathing slowly in and out to a count of 3 is simple and can be done anywhere at anytime.

### **I play in a band – I can't avoid hearing loud music!**

It's important to avoid damaging your hearing with loud sounds, whether that's playing or listening to music. Many musicians today wear special earplugs to protect their hearing. They allow the music through, but filter the overall noise. People who work on building sites often wear ear-defenders to muffle the sound of machinery for the same reason.

### **What else can I do?**

Keeping relaxed, fit and healthy will encourage your brain to listen to more interesting sounds. In most cases tinnitus settles down and goes away naturally.

Even if it doesn't go away, it will get better as time goes on, as your brain learns how to manage it.