

# Musical hallucination

**Dr Thomas E Cope**  
PhD MRCP (Neurology), Consultant Neurologist,  
Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge

**Musical hallucination (or musical tinnitus) is the experience of hearing music when none is being played. It is a form of tinnitus, and it is not thought to have a connection to mental health conditions.**

## What is musical hallucination?

You may be familiar with “earworms”, where a snatch of song or a jingle gets stuck in your head once you’ve heard it. Musical hallucination or musical tinnitus is also the experience of hearing music when none is being played, but it tends to be longer lasting, and doesn’t mirror any external music you may have heard recently.

Hearing sound that no-one else can hear is quite common and is called tinnitus. This experience is normally of a simple sound such as a buzzing, ringing, or

sizzling. For some people however, these experiences can be more complex and emotive, and music can be heard.

In most people with musical hallucination, there is no underlying cause. There is not thought to be a connection to mental health conditions.

The intrusiveness of musical tinnitus can be managed with the techniques used to treat other forms of tinnitus.

## What is musical hallucination like?

Musical hallucinations have a compelling sense of reality and are often mistaken for real music until it becomes clear that none is being played. This is especially true when musical hallucinations are experienced for the first time.

The sounds are typically heard as short fragments of simple melodies - often from music heard regularly and familiar from childhood such as songs played in school or church, national anthems and snatches of classical music.

People with hearing loss sometimes notice that the music in the hallucinations sounds as it did when it



Tinnitus UK tries very hard to make sure our information is right, but it cannot tell you everything. It is not a substitute for medical advice. You should always check with your doctor or hearing health professional.

.....

was first heard, not how it would with their current level of hearing loss.



## **Who gets musical hallucination?**

Although anyone can experience musical hallucination, there are some groups of people where it is more common. This includes people who live alone, and people with hearing loss. It is also more common in women than men and in people over 60 years of age.

## **What causes musical hallucination?**

In most people, there is no underlying cause found.

Very rarely, it can be caused by serious conditions, for example by problems with the blood vessels in the brain or by brain tumours. In these conditions there are likely to be other symptoms, but your doctor might choose to perform some investigations to rule them out.

Musical hallucination is also more common in individuals who have epilepsy or Alzheimer's disease. It is therefore very important to mention to your doctor if you have musical hallucination and experience changes in your vision, dizziness, severe headaches, problems with your speech or difficulties with movements.

## **Is it caused by my medications?**

Like tinnitus, a number of medications have been accused of causing or contributing to musical hallucination. However, nothing has been proven with the exception of medications based on opium, such as tramadol, morphine sulphate and oxycodone, which have been shown to cause musical hallucination in rare cases.

If you believe that your musical hallucination might be caused by one of these substances or another medication, it is important that you do not stop taking it or adjust the dosage without first discussing this with your GP or the doctor who prescribed the medication.

## **Is musical hallucination a psychiatric problem?**

The majority of individuals with musical hallucination do not have any psychiatric disturbance.

Some people with musical hallucination worry that it might be a symptom of a mental health condition, such as schizophrenia. Although in schizophrenia it is common to hear voices, it is in fact very rare to experience musical hallucination and there is thought to be no connection between the two conditions.

Musical hallucination is quite common in people who have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), in which they experience repetitive, intrusive and distressing thoughts and feel strong urges to repeatedly perform actions. It is estimated that around four in ten individuals with OCD will experience musical hallucination at some time in their life. It is important to remember that most people with musical hallucination do not have OCD.

---

## Can musical hallucination be treated?

If musical hallucination has an underlying cause, addressing the cause will often relieve the hallucination. It might be appropriate to use medication to treat the underlying condition and your doctor will be happy to discuss this with you.

The most common cause is hearing loss. Your doctor will probably ask you to have a hearing test. Based on the results of this, they may prescribe a hearing aid.

---

Many people find that musical hallucination becomes less intrusive once the condition has been explained and they are reassured that there is no serious underlying cause. If it continues to be troublesome despite this, it can be managed with the techniques used to treat other forms of tinnitus.

## Help and support

The Tinnitus UK Support Team can answer your questions on any tinnitus related topics:

Telephone: **0800 018 0527**

Web chat: **tinnitus.org.uk**

Email: **helpline@tinnitus.org.uk**

Text/SMS: **07537 416841**

We also offer a free tinnitus e-learning programme, Take on Tinnitus at **takeontinnitus.co.uk**

## References

The list of references consulted in the production of this leaflet is available on request.

## Alternative formats

This publication is available in large print on request.

## Feedback

We welcome feedback on all our information. You can pass your comments to our Communications Team:

Telephone: **0114 250 9933**

Email: **communications@tinnitus.org.uk**

or by writing to us at the address on p4.

## Tinnitus UK publications

*\*Available in Easy Read*

Our information leaflets are written by leading tinnitus professionals and provide accurate, reliable and authoritative information which is updated regularly. Please contact us if you would like to receive a copy of any of our information leaflets listed below, or they can be downloaded from our website.

### For adults:

*All about tinnitus\**  
*Complementary therapy for tinnitus: an opinion*  
*Drugs and tinnitus*  
*Ear wax removal and tinnitus*  
*Flying and the ear*  
*Food, drink and tinnitus*  
*Hearing aids and tinnitus\**  
*Hyperacusis*  
*Ideas for relaxation without sound*  
*Information for musicians*  
*Mindfulness for tinnitus*  
*Musical hallucination (musical tinnitus)*  
*Noise and the ear*  
*Otosclerosis*

*Pulsatile tinnitus*  
*Relaxation*  
*Self help for tinnitus\**  
*Sound therapy*  
*Sources of mutual support for tinnitus*  
*Supporting someone with tinnitus*  
*Taming tinnitus*  
*Tinnitus and disorders of the temporomandibular joint (TMJ) and neck*  
*Tinnitus: a parent's guide*  
*Tinnitus: a teacher's guide*  
*Tinnitus and sleep disturbance*  
*Tinnitus and stress*  
*Tinnitus services\**

### For children:

*Ellie, Leila and Jack have tinnitus (under 8s)*  
*Tinnitus (8-11 year olds)*  
*Tinnitus (11-16 year olds)*  
*Ellie, Leila and Jack have tinnitus activity book*  
*Tinnitus activity book (8-11 year olds)*  
*Tinnitus activity book (11-16 year olds)*



**Tinnitus UK**  
Ground Floor, Unit 5,  
Acorn Business Park,  
Woodseats Close,  
Sheffield S8 0TB

**Helpline 0800 018 0527**  
**Email [helpline@tinnitus.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tinnitus.org.uk)**  
**Website [tinnitus.org.uk](http://tinnitus.org.uk)**

Registered charity no: 1011145 | Registered in England  
Company limited by guarantee no: 2709302