

Tinnitus and sleep

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Disrupted sleep patterns affect most of us at some stage of our lives, but some people with tinnitus may find they have greater difficulty getting off to sleep.

Introduction

A disturbance to sleep patterns affects most of us at some stage of our lives. It affects all ages, including children, but is particularly prevalent amongst older adults.

Some people with tinnitus may find they have greater difficulty getting off to sleep. The shift from a relatively noisy daytime environment to the quietness of the bedroom can make the tinnitus noises more noticeable.

The sleep cycle

Sleep is a 24-hour cycle, so activities you carry out in the day will affect that night's sleep. A normal night's sleep has

several stages, from light to deep sleep, and includes several awakenings. The first awakening usually occurs after just a couple of hours sleep.

As you grow older, you experience less very deep sleep and more awakenings. Sleep becomes lighter and more fragmented and there is a tendency to nap during the day.

Most people get about seven or eight hours sleep when it is all added up, but average sleep times vary enormously.

Insomnia refers to **severe and ongoing difficulty** in falling and/or staying asleep. Generally, this means that the disturbance occurs at least three or four times a week and lasts for six months or more.

Tinnitus, sleep and waking

Many people with tinnitus do in fact sleep well and see sleep as a refreshing escape from tinnitus. Those people who sleep well **do not** seem to have 'different tinnitus' from those who have trouble sleeping.

The worries that you have about the length of sleep, or the effects of not



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sleeping, or about tinnitus generally, will probably have more of an impact on the quality of your sleep than the sound of tinnitus.

It seems most likely that you are woken up by other things, rather than tinnitus. Generally, people don't remember their natural awakenings. But if you wake up enough to notice your tinnitus, you may be kept awake for longer and remember this the next day.

Why do we need sleep?

Surprisingly, the exact benefit of sleeping is unclear. Possibly it conserves or restores energy. People do tend to feel bad if they have not slept well, but the physical impact of sleep loss is not as clear cut as you might think.

Studies of people who have been deliberately deprived of sleep tend to do less well on some psychological tests. People often perform well on logical, deductive tests (like IQ tests) but perform more poorly when asked to do 'executive' functioning tasks that require more creative thinking.

These effects are seen after **long periods** with no sleep. They are reversed by relatively short amounts of sleep in the same way that the feeling of 'jet lag', caused by sleep loss or a disruption to the body clock, usually passes with a return to a regular sleep pattern.

The situation is different for people who have chronic poor sleep (rather than no sleep at all). Poor sleep may not have the devastating consequences that most of us fear. Many people perform very well on little sleep, in spite of feeling bad.

Worrying about sleep loss is one of the things most likely to keep it going and one of the things most likely to create

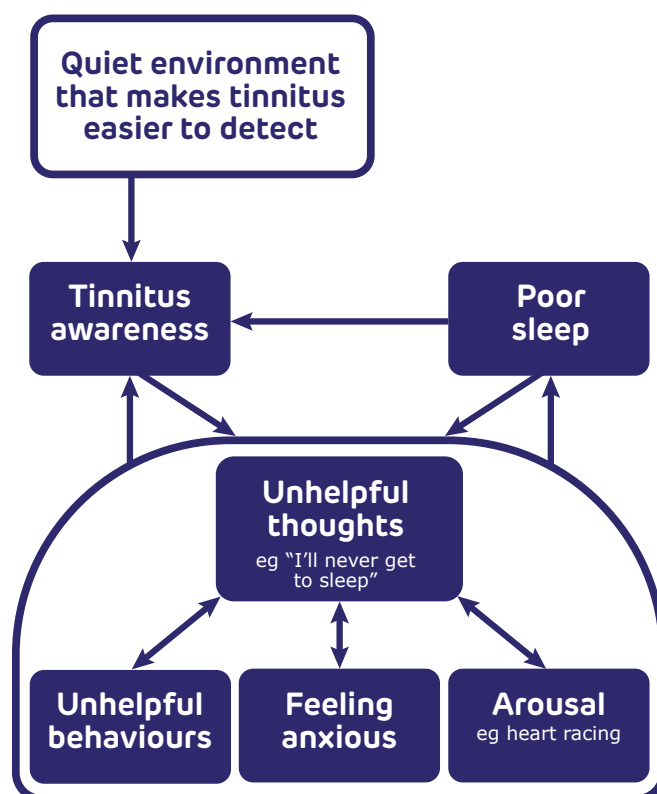
stress that can further impact on your wellbeing – and your tinnitus. The stress associated with it may also be a major reason why sleep loss can make you feel so bad.

A vicious cycle

When people with tinnitus experience periods of sleep loss or poor sleep, it is usually accompanied by anxiety.

You may recognise the following pattern. In the quiet of bedtime, you become more aware of your tinnitus. This leads to unhelpful worrying thoughts (such as, "I'll never be able to sleep!"). This creates a level of stress arousal (anxiety). This stress leads to not being able to sleep. As it becomes prolonged, poor sleep can increase your anxiety. It keeps you trapped in the vicious cycle of sleeplessness, worry and awareness of tinnitus.

This is illustrated in the diagram below.





Tips for a good night's sleep

Sleep is very much a matter of habit and routine. More often than not, poor sleep results from poor routines. Often the things we do to try and solve sleep problems actually make them worse. So here are some suggestions.

Do talk to your doctor if you suffer from insomnia. Sleep loss may be related to some other medical condition which may be treatable.

Consider an offer of sleep medication if it is offered by your GP. Medication is not a long-term solution to insomnia, but with medical guidance it can be a great relief for a short-term crisis.

Don't use alcohol or 'over the counter' medicines to induce sleep. They may send you to sleep but will also disrupt the normal sleep pattern. You may wake sooner and have greater trouble getting back to sleep.

Limit the amount of caffeine (tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks) and nicotine you take. These are stimulants and may help keep you awake. It may not be necessary to give them up completely, but rather cut down or cut them out in the evening.

Keep active during the day. Fit people sleep better than those who are unfit. However, don't exercise near bedtime.

Exercise late at night may tire you out but it may also disrupt the normal sleep cycle.

Try to unwind for at least an hour before bedtime. A busy mind makes it more difficult to sleep.

Write down any worries that you may have. Spend a set amount of time (say 15-20 minutes) doing this each evening. If you are able to, consider how you might resolve them. Even if you can't resolve your worries, writing them down can reduce anxiety.

Practice relaxation exercises during the day. Find some short form of relaxation to try at night. The Tinnitus UK website has suggestions you might like to try.

Go to bed when you feel sleepy, not just because it's a certain time on the clock.

Don't use the bedroom for things apart from sleep (and relaxation.) Don't watch television, complete crosswords or write work reports (for example) in bed. These things may distract you but they will also stimulate your mind. A busy mind will keep you awake.

Turn the light off as soon as you get into bed. Tell yourself that sleep will come when it's ready. Don't 'try hard' to go to sleep - resting in bed can be just as helpful.

Background sound can help mask the quiet of the room and the sound of tinnitus. Try different sounds and find what works for you. Some people use the sound of a fan or clocks ticking, have a radio on quietly or play natural noise such as waves or rain. The Tinnitus UK website has more information on sound therapy for you to read.

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Do get up and go to another room if you are not asleep in 25 to 30 minutes.

Do something relaxing like reading and go back to bed when you feel sleepy again. Repeat the process if you are not asleep in another 30 minutes.

Get up at the same time each day - even at weekends. Try not to sleep in the day. This will help you to keep your body clock in a helpful cycle.

Don't take it easy after a bad night's sleep. This might make the day more boring and increase the sense of tiredness. Most people can still do quite a lot after a bad night, and if you do, you may feel better for it - but use common sense.

Further reading

Overcoming insomnia and sleep problems: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques (2nd edition) by Colin A Espie (Robinson Publishing, ISBN-13 978-1472141415)

Sleepfaring: a journey through the science of sleep by Jim Horne (OUP Oxford ISBN-13 978-0199228379)

Living with tinnitus and hyperacusis (2nd edition) by Laurence McKenna, David Baguley and Don McFerran (Sheldon Press ISBN-13 978-1529375350)

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 page 5.

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)



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