

Tinnitus: a guide for parents

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Tinnitus is very common in children. Recent research suggests that one child in 30 has clinically significant tinnitus. This leaflet tells you about the signs to look out for and how to help, if your child has tinnitus.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the sensation of hearing a sound when there is no external source for that sound. It is generated by the hearing pathways in the brain.

Fortunately, it is rarely a sign of a serious physical problem. Sometimes, tinnitus is a symptom of something that will need further medical investigation, such as 'glue ear', hearing loss or an ear infection, so it is advisable to consult a GP. Tinnitus that fluctuates in time with your child's heartbeat (pulsatile tinnitus) should always be investigated

Do children get tinnitus?

Tinnitus is very common in children. Recent research suggests that one child in 30 has clinically significant tinnitus.

The incidence is higher in children with hearing loss. It appears to be twice as common compared to children with normal hearing.

There is some evidence to suggest that it may be common in children with otitis media (glue ear). Glue ear is caused by fluid that collects behind the ear drum. This can cause temporary hearing loss. Glue ear usually clears on its own with no treatment.

Most children are not troubled by their tinnitus, and it does not affect their performance at school. However, a small number of children can be distressed by it and need support.



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.



What does tinnitus sound like?

Everyone's tinnitus is different.

Many children hear a ringing sound, but others hear whistling, buzzing, hissing or crackling or a mixture of these.

The noise may be heard in one ear, both ears, or in the middle of the head. For some, it may be difficult to pinpoint its exact location. The noise may be low, medium or high pitched. There may be a single noise or two or more components. The noise may be continuous, or it may come and go. It can be quiet or very loud, or the volume may fluctuate.

How do I tell if my child has tinnitus?

Ask them! They may not tell you about it otherwise. Children will answer reliably if asked whether they have noises in their ears. They are usually capable of describing their noises. Younger children may talk in terms they are familiar with, such as buzzing bees or a choo-choo train.

Asking your child whether they hear noises in their ears or their head, and whether it bothers them, needs to be done sensitively. Children, particularly very young ones, may want to answer in the way they think will please you, especially if they don't fully understand

the question. Older children may be reluctant to talk about tinnitus, as they may not want to be seen as different, or they may feel they won't be believed.

Signs to look out for

Tinnitus may be impacting on different areas of your child's life. If you are noticing any of these issues in your child, it may be helpful to ask them if they have noises in their ears. These signs can also occur for other reasons.

- **Sleep difficulties** - particularly in a young child. They may want sound (such as music or TV) or may not want to fall asleep on their own or in a quiet bedroom.
- **Noise avoidance** - they might be distressed in a noisy environment or try to avoid noisy situations.
- **Quiet avoidance** - conversely, they may be unhappy in quiet places, or try to avoid quiet environments.
- **Difficulties in concentrating and listening** - these may be generalised, or specific. For example, they may find it hard to someone talking when there is background noise or in quiet situations.
- **Feelings of anger, frustration, fear or helplessness.**
- **Difficulty with hearing aid use** - most children with hearing aids experience less tinnitus with their hearing aids in. If your child's tinnitus is worse when wearing hearing aids, their hearing may need to be reassessed.
- **Unusual feelings in the ear** - particularly feelings of fullness.

What should I do if my child says they hear noises?

Whilst the experience of tinnitus is common, most children with tinnitus are not bothered by it. A simple explanation and some reassurance is all that is required. Tinnitus UK has information leaflets - targeted by age group - which you and your child may find helpful.

If your child is distressed by their tinnitus, and/or also complains of pain, feelings of ear fullness, vertigo, dizziness, hearing loss or if the tinnitus fluctuates in time with your child's heartbeat, consult your GP.

Whilst tinnitus is rarely a sign that urgent medical care is needed, the distress it can cause your child means that prompt intervention is advised. If distressing tinnitus is left untreated, it can have a significant impact on your child's physical and emotional well-being, and their educational progress.

Referral routes vary, but children are generally referred to paediatric audiology and/or ENT services. There are currently a few specialist tinnitus services for children in the UK, but the number is increasing steadily. The Tinnitus UK helpline can advise where your nearest local service is.

Won't asking my child about their tinnitus make them anxious?

Some parents (and health professionals) are concerned that asking a child about tinnitus may create awareness and anxiety, or that it may turn non-bothersome tinnitus into bothersome tinnitus. However, clinical experts have found that the opposite to be true. Asking about tinnitus gives an opportunity to reassure the child and



address any concerns they may have.

It is often helpful to bring up the topic as part of a gentle conversation, showing the child that you are interested in what they think about the tinnitus, and how it makes them feel.

If the tinnitus has always been present, your child may assume that everyone experiences the same, and will often be untroubled by it.

How does tinnitus affect children?

Most children find that the condition does not affect their daily life in any way, but a small number of children will require support to help with distress or the impact it has on their lives.

Tinnitus can be a difficult condition to learn to live with and can cause anxiety. Anxiety, in turn, often makes the experience of tinnitus worse.

Many children with tinnitus feel isolated because they don't know who to talk to about it. Experiencing the presence of sounds that they can't control or explain, or share can be very frightening.

Very young children may not know why they hear sounds in their head or ears, or may believe that there is actually something there, for example, buzzing bees, monsters or rice crispies.



Older children can share similar worries that there is something in their head, but they may also be worried that they are losing their hearing, “going mad”, or that they will be unable to go to university or get a job when they are older.

How can I help?

Take the time to listen to your child talk about their noises, their questions and their worries. If you have non-bothersome tinnitus yourself, it might be reassuring for your child if you share your experience.

If your child attempts to tell you about tinnitus and feels dismissed, they may worry about why you won't discuss it. They then become scared of tinnitus and what it might mean, or fear being ridiculed if they know it's a sound that only they can hear.

Your child will benefit from your patience and understanding as they adjust. Just letting them know that you are aware that what they are going through, will be a huge help.

The Tinnitus UK information leaflets and activity books have been designed to help you discuss tinnitus with your child.

Management techniques

There are several ways to reduce the impact of tinnitus at home, school or in social environments. Many parents develop a management plan with their child after assessing their experience of tinnitus. They share this with their child's teacher(s) and others, with their child's permission. This can help ensure that help is given where it is needed.

Along with your child, you and any health professionals involved will naturally look to strategies to help them cope better. These could include:

- simple breathing exercises or relaxation techniques. These can be helpful when they feel distressed or anxious.
- low-level noise (such as a computer or heating fan) or low-level background music. They may prefer to sit close to this sound or fall asleep with the sound running (if safe to do so).
- using background sound (e.g. a fan or sitting near an open window) or the use of low-level music on an MP3 player or smartphone while working in a quiet place. Being in a quiet place for a long time (e.g. during library time or exams) may be distressing for your child or make concentration difficult.
- a “support card” for your child which they have to hand. This may remind them about how to relax and breathe to help take their mind away from their tinnitus. This could be decorated with favourite pictures
- hearing protection when exposed to loud levels of sound, such as music practice or loud events. Discourage prolonged exposure to sound, loud music, computer games etc. For more tips go to:
tinnitus.org.uk/join-the-cause/plugem

What next?

Tinnitus UK's resources for you and your child can help them learn to live well with tinnitus. These include free information booklets and activity booklets.

Teenagers may find it interesting to explore our interactive tinnitus programme Take on Tinnitus at takeontinnitus.co.uk

We also have a guide for teachers that you might like to share with your child's teacher

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 6.

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 temporo-mandibular joint (TMJ) and neck
Tinnitus and pregnancy
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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