

TINNITUS

That ringing in your ears

A Complex Condition

Tinnitus (pronounced TIN-it-us or tin-NIGHT-us) is one of the most common, but misunderstood conditions. It is estimated that 50 million people in the U.S. suffer some degree of it. Tinnitus, or “head noise,” is characterized by a ringing, hissing, buzzing or roaring sound that seems to come from inside the ears. Tinnitus is not a disease, but a symptom that can be triggered by a variety of conditions or medications. Some degree of head noise is normal in all of us, and for most people, it goes away by itself and is not discernible at a conscious level. However, the frequency and intensity of tinnitus experienced by some is great enough to be an annoyance or a major disruption to normal activities.

Why it Happens

The underlying triggers for tinnitus are as varied as people’s individual experience of it. While researchers do not yet know all the specific mechanisms that trigger or worsen tinnitus, they have found that its onset can be associated with a wide array of conditions including:

- ❖ Inner ear disorders including age-related nerve damage
- ❖ Noise trauma or over-exposure to noise (sound levels above 85 decibels)
- ❖ Meniere’s disease
- ❖ Acoustic tumors (neuromas)
- ❖ Ear wax or other foreign objects in the ear canal
- ❖ Head and neck trauma
- ❖ TMJ or jaw joint misalignment
- ❖ Ear infections, allergies
- ❖ Eustachian tube dysfunction or middle ear problems (e.g. otosclerosis)
- ❖ Muscle spasms
- ❖ Cardiovascular disease
- ❖ High doses of some chemicals or medications
- ❖ Stress, depression and anxiety
- ❖ Systemic disorders including hormonal changes, diabetes, anemia, thyroid dysfunction, aneurisms, high or low blood pressure, fibromyalgia and Lyme disease

Helpful Treatments

Some people find that reducing their intake of sodium, caffeine and nicotine can reduce or eliminate their tinnitus. Current treatments for those with chronic or severe tinnitus focus primarily on managing and minimizing conscious recognition of the internal noise.

Counseling may help people deal with the anxiety and distraction associated with tinnitus. Stress management and biofeedback are the most common techniques applied. Habituation training, masking and other sound therapies, anti-anxiety drugs or other medications are some of the treatments recommended for those with chronic tinnitus. Additional treatment options include hearing aids, cochlear implants, electrical stimulation and TMJ treatment.

Future Outlook

Scientific research of tinnitus has been limited due to the variety of physical and psychological factors that can contribute to it. Without a definitive target for study and data collection, it is difficult for pharmaceutical companies to consider new drug screenings or clinical trials based on research findings. Nonetheless, there is renewed interest in tinnitus research and over the last 10 years scientists have made tremendous advances in figuring out what causes tinnitus, providing new avenues for pharmaceutical studies of effective drug targets, and possibly, a cure.