

Tinnitus

What it is and how to manage it

This fact sheet aims to provide patients with general information about tinnitus. If you would like to know more, please speak with your doctor or audiologist.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a condition in which you hear a sound in your ears or head when there is no sound present. It is often described as a ringing, buzzing, humming, hissing, thumping, pulsatile or a roaring noise. However, tinnitus can be any sound or a combination of different sounds. It can come and go, or it can be constant. Tinnitus can also change over time or with other health factors.

Tinnitus is very common. Although numbers vary around the world, 2 in 3 Australians experience tinnitus at some point in their life. 10 – 20% of people have tinnitus that severely affects their quality of life. Both adults and children can have tinnitus.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus can be caused by many different reasons. It is not a disease or an illness. It is often a symptom of ear or hearing issues. It may also be a symptom of another health issue. It can be brought on by any of the following things:

- Hearing loss
- Exposure to loud noises
- Build-up of ear wax (cerumen)
- Ear problems (such as ear infections)
- Problems with the jaw joint (temporo-mandibular joint or TMJ) or neck problems
- Injuries to the ears or head
- Issues with circulation
- Some medicines
- Stress and anxiety

For many, tinnitus can happen for no known reason or cause. People with normal hearing or no other health conditions can also have tinnitus.

What to do if you have tinnitus?

Book an appointment with an audiologist to check your hearing. Your audiologist will discuss the possible causes for your tinnitus. There may be a simple explanation. In some cases, it may be more medically complex. You should also talk to your family doctor if you are experiencing any of the following:

- New onset of tinnitus, especially with a sudden change to your hearing or balance
- Tinnitus in only one ear
- Tinnitus that is getting worse
- Tinnitus with fullness or pressure in your ears
- Tinnitus that affects your sleep or quality of life
- Pulsatile tinnitus (same rhythm as your pulse)

Your family doctor may investigate further. This can include referring you for further tests or to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) doctor for a medical opinion.

What can we do to help with tinnitus?

Many people will find their tinnitus improves with time without doing anything special. However, for some people, tinnitus can trigger ongoing negative reactions. These can include anger, distress, and anxiety. It's important to get support from health care professionals on ways to manage your tinnitus. Below are some techniques that can help manage tinnitus:

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT aims to reduce the distress caused by tinnitus by changing how you think about and react to it. This is done by understanding how your thoughts about your tinnitus can lead to certain behaviours, emotions, and attitudes. CBT may improve your quality of life and lower risk of depression. Talk to your doctor about being referred to a clinical psychologist if you wish to access CBT.

Hearing Aids

Hearing aids may be right option for you if you have hearing loss and tinnitus. Hearing aids are devices that are worn in or around the ear that make it easier to hear. They can help improve communication. Hearing aids can also help reduce your tinnitus. Hearing aids make sounds around you easier to hear. As a result, the tinnitus might become less noticeable. Some hearing aids have software that plays sounds to help with your tinnitus. Talk to your audiologist to discuss whether hearing aids are right for you.

Reduce Stress / Lifestyle Changes

Stress and anxiety can increase your awareness of your tinnitus. Knowing the signs of stress and using strategies to help manage stress can minimise the impact on your tinnitus. Strategies can include, talking to someone you trust, eating a well-balance diet, getting adequate, good-quality sleep, and exercising. Techniques that help you relax, such as yoga or mindfulness, may also be helpful. Doing hobbies and activities that you enjoy may take your mind off your tinnitus as well.

Sound Enrichment / Sound Therapy

Tinnitus is more noticeable when it's quiet. The presence of other sounds may help make tinnitus less noticeable. Using sounds as a distraction from tinnitus is called sound enrichment or sound therapy. Sound therapy can be provided by the things already around you, such as a fan in the bedroom or the sound of running water. You can also play sounds through a device, such as a CD, MP3 Player, or smartphone app. Make sure to play sounds that are pleasant and soothing for you.

Tinnitus Retraining Therapy (TRT) / Tinnitus Management Clinics

Some audiology clinics provide special tinnitus programs. You can access these tinnitus programs through select audiology clinics. Contact your local audiology clinic for more information.

Further Information and Support

Tinnitus Australia

www.tinnitusaustralia.org.au

Crisis Support

Lifeline

131 114

Beyond Blue

1300 22 463