

information sheet

What is Tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the name given to sounds in the head and ears that do not come from an outside source. The sounds vary from person to person and have been described as sounding like

- Ringing
- Buzzing
- Whistling
- Hissing
- Grinding
- Roaring
- Cicadas
- Birds

Tinnitus is often, but not always, associated with hearing loss.

For many people who have tinnitus, the sounds are just a nuisance. For others, tinnitus can affect their ability to sleep, concentrate, work and relax.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a symptom that usually indicates a problem or change somewhere in the hearing system. Although tinnitus is often associated with hearing loss, it can also be experienced by people with healthy hearing.

The sounds people hear include ringing, hissing and clicking. Some people hear the sounds in just one ear. Others hear the sounds in both ears or sense sounds just outside the head.

Who gets tinnitus?

Although often associated with hearing loss, children and adults with good hearing can also experience tinnitus. And many people with hearing loss never suffer tinnitus.

If you experience tinnitus, it does not mean you are going to go deaf or that your current hearing loss is going to get worse.

What causes tinnitus?

Scientists all over the world are trying to work out where, why and how tinnitus starts. Recent research evidence suggests that it starts either in the brain or the inner ear.

Things that may cause changes in the hearing system include

- Damage to the inner ear from normal ageing or loud music
- Neck and head injuries
- Ear infections
- Stress
- Raised blood pressure
- Drugs

Different forms of tinnitus

Tinnitus has two forms – subjective tinnitus (the most common form) and objective tinnitus. With subjective tinnitus, the only person who can hear the sounds is the person who experiences them. With objective tinnitus, another person can also hear the sounds, by using a stethoscope or another listening device.

How do you diagnose tinnitus?

If you think are experiencing tinnitus, talk to your local doctor. Only a medical practitioner, such as a local or specialist doctor, can diagnose tinnitus.

To make a diagnosis, your doctor will ask you questions like

When did you start hearing sounds?

Does anything make the sounds better or worse?

The doctor will also thoroughly examine your ears and ask for extra diagnostic tests if necessary.

What help is available?

If you've been diagnosed with tinnitus, ask your doctor to refer you to a hearing therapist or audiologist for help. There are many treatments and therapies available to help you manage your symptoms. Here are just some of the options.

Counselling

Audiologists, hearing therapists and other trained people can help you understand what's happening and teach you a range of coping techniques. Sometimes, just reducing the level of anxiety you feel about the sounds, can reduce the impact of your tinnitus.

Auditory habituation therapies

These therapies focus on helping you to ignore or get used to your tinnitus.

An audiologist will help you find a hearing device that makes the right sort of noise to mask your tinnitus sounds.

The idea is that over time, your brain will get used to hearing an external, non-threatening sound. And will learn to ignore the tinnitus.

These therapies are usually combined with counselling, for periods of 6-8 months.

Talk to your doctor, hearing therapist or audiologist to find out more.

Masking devices to help with sleep

Tinnitus can often be very disturbing at night.

Finding a noise that helps to mask the tinnitus sounds may help you sleep.

Some people find that tuning a radio between FM stations helps, because of the static or white noise produced.

Or there are devices available that can play different masking sounds, such as rainfall, ocean or surf.

These can play through pillow speakers so others in the room aren't disturbed.

Again, your doctor, hearing therapist or audiologist can make recommendations that are right for you.

More information and support

NFD (National Foundation for the Deaf)

www.nfd.org.nz

205 Parnell Road

PO Box 37729, Parnell, Auckland 1151

Ph 0800 867446

Tel/TTY 09 3072922

Fax 09 3072923

Email enquiries@nfd.org.nz

The Hearing Association

www.hearing.org.nz

c/- Suite 1, 5 Bouverie Street, Petone

PO Box 5876, Lambton Quay, Wellington 6145

Ph 0800 233445

Tel 04 9396754

Fax 04 9396719

Email enquiries@hearing.org.nz

New Zealand Tinnitus Association

www.tinnitus.org.nz

PO Box 334007, Sunnynook Postshop, North Shore City 0743

Tel 09 4491019

Hearing & Tinnitus Clinic – The University of Auckland

www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/soph/depts/audiology/clinic

Tamaki Campus, School of Population Health

261 Morrin Road, Glen Innes, Building 730, Level 1

Tel 09 3738791

Email audiologyclinic@auckland.ac.nz

Hearing Therapists – LIFE Unlimited

www.life.nzl.org

Central House, Level 5

26 Brandon Street, Wellington

Ph 0800 008011

Tel 04 4995851

Fax 04 4995853

Email info@life.nzl.org

We've prepared these fact sheets using information from external sources and advice from NZ-based experts. Please feel free to copy or use any of the material.

The information, while accurate at time of printing, cannot replace expert advice from a hearing professional. Always seek help quickly for any ear or hearing problem.

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