

Tinnitus

Tinnitus is a **physical** condition experienced as noises or ringing in the ears or head when no external physical noise is present. Tinnitus is usually caused by a fault in the hearing system; it is a **symptom**, not a disease in itself.

- Tinnitus is common, with millions of sufferers around the world
- 18% of Australians will suffer from tinnitus at some time in their lives
- Every person's tinnitus sound is individual to them though it is often described as a ringing, buzzing, roaring or clicking sensation, or the sound of crickets chirping in one ear, both ears or in the head. It can be soft or loud, high or low pitched, and is heard when no physical noise is present.

Why is there a noise in my ears?

Tinnitus is a symptom of something being faulty with the auditory system which incorporates the ear, the auditory nerve that connects the ear to the brain, and the parts of the brain that process sound. It can arise from exposure to loud noise, hearing loss, ear problems, and viral infections, sometimes it is related to a medical condition or something as simple as a piece of earwax blocking the ear canal. It can also be the result of a number of health conditions such as noise induced hearing loss, thyroid abnormalities, Meniere's disease and hormonal changes in women. Tinnitus is sometimes the first sign of hearing loss in older people. It also can be a side effect of medications. 86% of tinnitus sufferers also have some form of hearing loss.

Even with all of these associated conditions and causes some people develop tinnitus for no obvious reason. Most of the time, tinnitus isn't a sign of a serious health problem but if it's loud or doesn't go away, it can cause fatigue, depression, anxiety, and problems with memory and concentration. Tinnitus impacts quality of sleep, the ability to relax, communicate effectively and function normally, and can increase sensitivity to sound. Tinnitus is a constant annoyance for many people but for some it can be a source of real mental and emotional anguish. Although there is no cure for tinnitus you can implement a variety of techniques to help manage its impact on your life.

What should I do if I have tinnitus?

Seeing your doctor is the first step to check if earwax or anything else is blocking the ear canal. Your current health, medical conditions and medications will be discussed to find out if an underlying condition is causing your tinnitus. If your doctor cannot find any medical condition responsible for your tinnitus, you may be referred to an audiologist who can assess your hearing and evaluate your tinnitus or an ear nose and throat specialist who may physically examine your head, neck and ears.

What if the sounds in my ear do not go away?

Some people find their tinnitus doesn't go away or it gets worse. In some cases it may become so severe that they find it difficult to hear, concentrate, or even sleep. Your doctor and audiologist will work with you to help find ways to reduce the severity of the noise and its impact on your life.

Are there treatments that can help me?

Tinnitus does not have a cure yet, but treatments that help many people cope better with the condition are available. Most doctors and audiologists will offer a combination of the treatments depending on the severity of your tinnitus and the areas of your life it affects the most.



Can I do anything to prevent tinnitus or stop it from getting worse?

Noise induced hearing loss which is the result of damage to the sensory hair cells of the inner ear, is one of the most common causes of tinnitus. Loud noise will make tinnitus worse. Anything you can do to limit your exposure to loud noise – by moving away from the sound, turning down the volume, or wearing hearing protection will help prevent tinnitus or keep it from getting worse.

There are a variety of strategies to help relieve the symptoms of tinnitus:

Minimise stress and fatigue

- you may have to assess your current lifestyle
- relaxation techniques are a commonly used strategy
- hypnotherapy has been used to treat tinnitus.

Quit smoking

- smoking narrows your blood vessels which supply vital oxygen to your ears and their sensory cells.

Reduce caffeine and alcohol

- they can temporarily make tinnitus worse for some people.

Hearing aids

- some audiologists run specialist tinnitus clinics to help you manage your tinnitus, and they fit hearing aids and/or therapeutic noise generators if needed
- good quality and properly fitted hearing aids can reduce some tinnitus associated with hearing loss. Hearing aids take away the strain of listening and they can distract you from the tinnitus by bringing you more environmental sounds from the outside world.

Cognitive behaviour therapy

- offered by clinical psychologists, has been used to change the way people think about tinnitus, learn ways to focus attention away from tinnitus, and control the stress associated with tinnitus.

Sleep disturbance

- tinnitus can cause sleep disturbances, research has found that relaxation techniques can be effective
- avoid complete quiet – keeping your ears busy with low-level background noise can help your brain to focus on these sounds rather than the ringing of the tinnitus
- mask your tinnitus, try surrounding yourself with pleasant noise, for example listening to relaxation music, rain falling on the roof, or the ocean surf
- try experimenting with low intensity background noise in the bedroom, for example playing the radio softly or have a fan oscillating.

Further information

Further information on noise is available from the [Creating Healthier Workplaces website](#).