

Working to relieve the pressure!

Tinnitus basics



Most people experience brief periods of high pitched ringing at some point in their life, and it's common if you're exposed to loud noise to experience tinnitus for a while afterwards. Tinnitus is a sensation of sound where there's no external source for the sound. It may be ringing, whistling, rushing, or more complex like machinery or various other sounds. It may not always be present, and is often more noticeable when it's quiet. The cause is often unknown, but tinnitus can be caused by loud noise, ear infections, changes in hearing, stress and anxiety, and some drugs and medications.

What's different with pulsatile tinnitus?

In contrast to ordinary tinnitus, pulsatile tinnitus is a rhythmic noise with the same rate as the heart. Some people describe it as low pitched thumping, a blowing sound, a clicking, higher pitched rhythmic sensation, or a swishing, whooshing sound.

Pulsatile tinnitus can be due to alterations in blood flow in veins around the head and neck. In IIH, though, it's thought transmission of the sound of the flow of the cerebrospinal fluid under high pressure moving around the brain causes the pulse synchronous (pulsatile) tinnitus or intracranial noise. It's also thought that the increased pressure also affects the cochlear nerve in the inner ear, which could explain why IIH sometimes affects hearing, and also explains why people with IIH often also have balance problems and nausea.



When to consult the doctor?

If you've been diagnosed with IIH and have pulsatile tinnitus, the chances are the two are linked, but it's still important to tell your doctor. Don't just assume it's IIH - always get any new symptoms checked out. There are tests that can be done to establish whether it's likely that IIH is the cause of your tinnitus, and your doctor will be able to advise you of local sources of support. Tinnitus in itself is not dangerous and some of the self-help strategies below often help.



Tinnitus self help

Tinnitus can feel very isolating, depressing and frustrating, especially combined with all the other IIH symptoms, but there are a number of things you can do to make living with tinnitus more bearable.

Relaxation

It's easier said than done, but if you're stressed and tense you concentrate more on your symptoms. The more you concentrate, the worse they are - it's a vicious circle. Try and break that vicious circle by relaxing.

Some people find types of relaxation such as yoga or tai-chi help them, but you can teach yourself simple relaxation techniques, concentrating on your breathing or lying down in a comfortable position, relaxing each part of your body in turn. Alternatively you could use one of the varieties of relaxation cassettes or CDs that are available, or those which have soothing natural sounds or soothing music.



Exercise

Being physically fit helps your body deal with the stresses and strains of everyday life. Try and do some exercise, within the limitations of your symptoms, even if it's only walking a short distance. Exercise releases endorphins, the body's own 'feel good' chemical that gives us a sense of well-being, keeps the body supple and flexible and can increase cardiovascular fitness. If you take up any strenuous activity, take it gently to start with. Always consult your doctor before taking up any exercise programme if you're unused to exercise.

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Activity

How many times have you found yourself totally absorbed in a good book, or a hobby and completely lost track of time? Mental activity can help block out physical sensations including things like tinnitus. If your mind is occupied by something absorbing, whether work, a hobby, a good book or something else, you'll be less aware of your tinnitus. You could take up a new hobby or find a new interest - but be careful not to concentrate too hard - it could have the opposite effect and make you concentrate on your tinnitus more!



Sound therapy

For many people the worst thing for tinnitus is silence. Some quiet music or the radio in the background, a relaxation cassette or CD - many people have found their own solutions to very quiet environments. Experiment and see what works for you. You can provide sound therapy for yourself by 'avoiding silence'. Some ideas are table-top sound generators, pillow speakers that plug into a sound generator or bedside radio, nature sounds or neutral music, or electric fans.



Support

Find sources of support. Just finding more information about your condition can make you feel less isolated as you come to realise that others share similar experiences to you. Talking to other people with tinnitus can help and there are many local tinnitus support groups.

Sleep

Sleep is important to us all and is essential for our bodies to rest and recover, but many people who suffer from tinnitus may have difficulty in sleeping or suffer from insomnia. The first step to good sleep is to go to bed at roughly the same time each night so your body gets into the habit. Avoid stimulants like tea and coffee and nicotine which keep you awake. Try and relax by avoiding strenuous activity late at night and having a warm bath. Make sure your bedroom isn't silent. If it's very quiet you'll concentrate more on your tinnitus. Leave a window open so that you can hear distant traffic sounds, play a cassette or CD softly.

How health professionals can help

At present there's no medical or surgical solution for tinnitus in most cases, though research is ongoing. Often the self-help strategies outlined in this leaflet will help, but if your tinnitus is interfering with your day-to-day life, referral to a tinnitus clinic may help you. Tinnitus clinics assess your hearing, tinnitus, sensitivity to sound and advise you on the best type of treatment for you. The tinnitus clinic may fit wearable sound generators (these look like tiny hearing aids, and make a gentle rushing sound), or if you also have a hearing problem, appropriate hearing aids. Habituation Therapy is a combination of sound therapy, counselling and relaxation techniques. Habituation involves becoming less reactive toward tinnitus and, as a result, less aware of it.



Other sources of help are -

The British Tinnitus Association produces a number of leaflets about tinnitus, information on sources of help, support groups and a newsletter. For more information contact:

British Tinnitus Association, Ground Floor, Unit 5, Acorn Business Park, Woodseats Close, Sheffield, S8 0TB.
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