

TINNITUS...That Ringing in your Ears
Harriet Jacobster, AuD
ASHA Certified Doctor of Audiology

You think you hear a bell ringing, steam hissing...or crickets chirping. You look around and there is nothing making the sound. Then you realize the sound is coming from your own ears.

If this ever happened to you, you are not alone. What you are experiencing is *tinnitus* (*TIN-i-tus* or *ti-NIGHT-us*). *Tinnitus* is the perception of sound in the ears or head when there is no external source causing the sound. Tinnitus has been described as ringing, hissing, static, crickets, screeching, whooshing, roaring, pulsing, ocean waves, buzzing, dial tones, even music.

Approximately 50 million people in the United States experience tinnitus to some degree. Sixteen million have it severe enough that they seek medical advice. And about two million are so adversely affected that their quality of life – sleeping, working, concentrating, etc. – deteriorates and they cannot function on a "normal," day-to-day basis.

Causes of Tinnitus

The exact causes of tinnitus are not known. There are, however, several risk factors which can trigger or worsen tinnitus. The most common are:

- Noise exposure - Exposure to loud noises can damage the delicate nerves in the inner ear. Once damaged, these hair cells cannot be repaired.
- Head and neck trauma
- Certain systemic disorders, such as hypo- or hyperthyroidism, Lyme disease, or fibromyalgia
- Certain tumors
- Wax build-up
- Jaw misalignment/Temporal Mandibular Joint disease (TMJ)
- Ototoxicity – Some medications are toxic to the ear; that is, they can cause hearing loss or balance problems, while others will cause tinnitus. Effects, which can depend on the dosage of the medication, can be temporary or permanent. Before taking any medication, make sure that your prescribing physician is aware of your tinnitus, and discuss alternative medications that may be available.
- High blood pressure/ abnormal blood flow/Cardiovascular disease. These can produce pulsatile tinnitus – a rhythmic pulsing in the ear.

Tinnitus and Hearing Loss

Tinnitus itself is a *symptom*, not a disease. It often accompanies hearing loss; but the two do not always occur together. There are many people with “normal” hearing who experience tinnitus. However, if loud enough, tinnitus can interfere with hearing. Because of the personal nature of hearing, hearing loss and tinnitus, each situation is unique. Therefore, it is imperative to seek a complete evaluation to determine the nature and extent of tinnitus and to start specialized treatment.

Treatment Options for Tinnitus

First and foremost, it is imperative that any underlying condition/s be treated. Once done, there are several options for Tinnitus Treatment and Management. The most common are:

- Amplification (Hearing Aids) /Tinnitus maskers
- Biofeedback
- Cognitive Therapy
- Drug Therapy
- Sound Therapy
- Tinnitus Management Strategies

It is important to note that these options do not work for everyone and do not work to the same degree for each individual patient. Your tinnitus treatment plan must be tailored to your specific needs. If you have tinnitus and/or hearing loss, please discuss your particular situation with a qualified health professional, such as your audiologist. You do not have to suffer anymore....