

Tune out tinnitus

How you can manage
the noises in your ears

RNID •)))

Changing the world for deaf
and hard of hearing people

We're RNID, the charity
working to change
the world for the UK's
9 million deaf and hard
of hearing people.

www.rnid.org.uk

Tinnitus is the medical term for any noise that people hear in one ear, both ears or in their head. You should read this leaflet if you have tinnitus, or know someone with tinnitus.

We will tell you:

- what tinnitus is and what it sounds like
- what causes tinnitus
- the link between sensitivity to sound and tinnitus
- about treatment and getting help
- ways of managing tinnitus.

And if you need more help, contact our free and confidential Tinnitus Helpline. We can give:

- support and the opportunity to discuss your tinnitus
- free factsheets, leaflets and other information about tinnitus
- contact details of your nearest hospital tinnitus clinics, plus useful organisations, support groups and self-help groups.

RNID Tinnitus Helpline

Telephone **0808 808 6666** (freephone)

Textphone **0808 808 0007** (freephone)

SMS **0780 0000 360**

Fax **020 7296 8199**

tinnitushelpline@rnid.org.uk

www.tuneouttinnitus.org.uk

Medical disclaimer

The information given in this leaflet is not medical advice and by providing it neither RNID nor our tinnitus and medical advisers undertake any responsibility for your medical care, nor accept you as a patient. Before acting on any of the information contained in this leaflet, or deciding on a course of treatment, you should discuss the matter with your GP (family doctor) or other medical professional who is treating you.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a medical term to describe noise(s) that people can hear in one ear, both ears or in the head – such as ringing, buzzing or whistling. The sounds heard can vary from person to person, but the common link is that they do not have an external source.

What does tinnitus sound like?

Tinnitus sounds can take a variety of forms such as buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing or a range of other sounds. For some people it can even sound like music or singing (see our factsheet, **Musical hallucinations**). Sometimes people only notice these sounds when it is very quiet, such as at night. Other people find that they are much louder and can intrude on everyday life. Sometimes tinnitus noise beats in time with your pulse. This is known as pulsatile tinnitus.

See our factsheet, **Pulsatile tinnitus**.

How common is tinnitus?

Most people have experienced brief periods of tinnitus at some time. It is quite common to have it for a short while after you have been exposed to loud noise – for example, after a music concert. Tinnitus is very common in people of all ages, so you are not alone.



What causes tinnitus?

There are many different causes of tinnitus. We know that tinnitus can be linked to:

- exposure to loud noise
- hearing loss
- ear or head injuries
- some diseases of the ear
- ear infections
- emotional stress
- a side effect of medication, or a combination of any of the above.

Many people with tinnitus have never experienced any of the above and don't have a hearing loss. There are several theories and ongoing research as to how tinnitus is generated.

To understand what happens when you have tinnitus, you need to understand how your ear works.

The hearing pathway

The ear is made up of three parts, the outer, middle and inner ear. These parts of the ear change sound waves around you into nerve signals, which then travel up the hearing nerve to the brain. Once the signals reach the hearing part of the brain known as the auditory cortex, you will hear them as sound.

The hearing pathway has a complex filtering system that allows you to 'tune in' to sounds that have meaning to you and 'filter out' sounds that do not. For example, you may not notice the background noise of traffic, but you would notice the sound of a baby crying. This system works all the time and stops you being bombarded with sound.

Your brain also has systems that respond to the meaning of sounds and help influence the way that you filter them. For example, if you hear your name at a party, you will tune in to hear what is being said. This is because the sound of your name is especially meaningful to you. Together, these filters and response systems help to control how you react to sound.

The tinnitus signal

Your hearing pathway, your filters and your sound response systems are all involved when you hear tinnitus. First, a tinnitus signal is created, usually in your inner ear or the auditory nerve. This is usually very weak and most people don't notice it. However, if you become aware of tinnitus, this means that your filters have started to pick up this tinnitus signal.

If you become anxious or annoyed by tinnitus, your sound response systems will tune your filters into it and you will start to hear it more.

The aim of tinnitus management is to help you learn to ignore the tinnitus signal.

Why do I feel sensitive to sound?

Around 40% of people with tinnitus are also more sensitive than normal to everyday sounds.

Broadly speaking, there are two forms of sensitivity to sound:

- **Hyperacusis** – you may find sound in general or certain sounds uncomfortable or painfully loud, even when they don't bother other people.
- **Misophonia** or noise annoyance – you may find some sounds extremely irritating, even though you may not be particularly sensitive to sounds in general. If your dislike is strong enough, the term **phonophobia** is used.

For more information, see our factsheet **Hyperacusis**.

Can tinnitus be treated?

There is currently no cure for tinnitus that works in the same way for everyone. But it is sometimes possible to treat the underlying condition that may be causing it. For example, if you have an ear infection, antibiotics may help clear this up, which may in turn improve the tinnitus.

If the tinnitus is linked to a particular medicine you are taking, it may stop if you change or stop taking that medicine. But you must ask your GP before you change your medicine, alter your dose or stop taking it altogether. It is also important to let your GP know of any over-the-counter drugs you are taking.

Where can I go for help?

The first person you need to see is your GP. They will check that your ears are free from wax and infection and may refer you to the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department at your hospital.



Although GPs are trained to a high level in a wide area of medicine, they are not tinnitus experts and their knowledge about treatments for tinnitus may vary.

When some people visit their GP about tinnitus they may find it difficult to get a referral to an ENT department. Make sure you tell your doctor that the tinnitus is a problem and how it is affecting you. For example, is it making you feel stressed, or giving you sleep problems? Are you finding it difficult to cope? It may be useful to take along some leaflets or factsheets about tinnitus, such as this one. Contact RNID or the British Tinnitus Association (see page 15) for free copies.

If you still can't get a referral, try seeing a different doctor in the practice or even changing to a different practice altogether. You have the right to a second opinion. Most GPs are helpful and it is worth seeking their help.

What will happen at the hospital?

First, you will see a specialist at the ENT department. It is important to have a thorough check-up to see if there are any obvious causes of your tinnitus. You may then be referred to a tinnitus clinic if there is one in your area. These are usually run by staff from the audiology department.

Some hospitals have specialist tinnitus centres or clinics, but services vary depending on where you live. Some areas may offer a limited tinnitus service or in some cases no service at all. Getting an NHS appointment may sometimes involve delays and waiting lists, so be prepared to wait.

Contact the RNID Tinnitus Helpline (see page 3) to find out where your nearest clinic is.

How do audiology departments help?

Your specialist may suggest you try habituation therapy. This changes your sound response systems so that you gradually become less aware of the tinnitus. Habituation therapy can involve:

- counselling
- hearing aid(s)
- relaxation or sound therapy.

How can counselling help?

Counselling is a very important part of tinnitus management. It can help you understand your tinnitus better. Talking about tinnitus and sharing how it makes you feel can also be very helpful.

How can hearing aids help?

If you have a hearing loss, a hearing aid can help with tinnitus management by:

- helping to compensate for your hearing loss
- stopping your ears straining to hear
- increasing the information available to the brain by picking up background sounds around you.

All these will help distract you from paying attention to tinnitus.

What is sound therapy?

Sound therapy is also known as sound enrichment. Many people find that they are more aware of tinnitus in a quiet environment. Sound therapy works by filling the silence with therapeutic sounds. These distract you from listening to your tinnitus, making it less noticeable and therefore less intrusive. This helps your filters to tune out tinnitus. Sound therapy involves listening to a range of sounds that you find pleasant, such as recordings of nature sounds, or by using a sound generator, or home sound system.

See our factsheet, **Equipment, sound therapy and tinnitus**.

How do sound generators work?

A sound generator produces a gentle, soft 'rush' (white noise) which sounds like an off-tune, or off-station, radio. This can help retrain your brain to ignore tinnitus. The volume should be set at just below the level of the tinnitus. You can get different styles of sound generator. Sound generators that you wear in your ear look like hearing aids. You may not be offered all styles on the NHS as availability varies throughout the country. It will also depend on what is most appropriate for your needs.



What other sounds can help?

Some people find everyday sounds helpful, such as the television, radio, an electric fan or music. You may have to experiment until you find the sort of music that works best for you. Ideally the music shouldn't be too stimulating or emotional. Some people find natural sounds helpful, such as the sea, the rainforest or birds, either on their own or combined with pleasant music.

Be careful not to cover the sound of the tinnitus by playing any of these sounds too loudly. However, at night you may find it useful to use background sound to help you get to sleep.

We sell desktop sound generators and a range of relaxation CDs and cassettes. They have all been recommended by people with tinnitus. Contact RNID Tinnitus Helpline for more information.

- **Pure Calm** CD of tranquil music.
- **Natural Stress Relief** CD of nature sounds and music.
- **Sea and Garden** Relaxation programme on CD and cassette.
- **Ultimate Relaxation** CD and cassette including two practical exercises to help you meditate and relax your muscles (not recommended for people with epilepsy).

We also have a book called *Understanding tinnitus – managing the noises in your ears or in your head*. This book has been written by audiology specialists who have experienced tinnitus themselves.

It tells you about:

- what we know about tinnitus
- how to get help and support
- ways to help yourself such as relaxation and counselling
- getting a good night's sleep
- alternative therapies.

Why is relaxation important?

A regular relaxation routine can help you manage the stress that is often associated with tinnitus. Many people notice their tinnitus more when they are worried or tired, and this in turn increases their levels of anxiety and stress.

You can learn to control your responses to stress by using relaxation techniques. These are taught in many tinnitus clinics and audiology departments, or try local adult education classes in relaxation techniques, or classes in meditation or yoga.

See our factsheet **Tinnitus and relaxation** for more information.

Can children get tinnitus?

Yes, and they can also get hyperacusis. Children may be born with tinnitus or develop it in the same way that adults do. Children born with tinnitus or who develop it at a very young age may not realise it is unusual. They often do not have the words to describe their tinnitus until they reach school age. As with any childhood ear problem, get specialist help as soon as possible by contacting your child's GP.

See our factsheet **Tinnitus and children**.

Want to know more?

Make sure you continue to get up-to-date information about deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus by joining RNID.

Our lively, bi-monthly, award-winning magazine, *One in Seven*, is packed full of useful information and advice, including product reviews, reader views and news and events.

How to join

Anyone can be a member, and it costs from £12.50 a year.

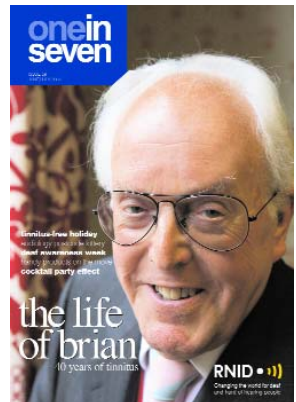
To join:

- visit www.rnid.org.uk/join or
- call **0845 634 0679** (tel/textphone) or
- fill in the coupon over the page.

You can save money by paying by direct debit

Contact us for more information:

Membership Team
RNID
19-23 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8SL
Tel/textphone **0845 634 0679**
membership@rnid.org.uk
www.rnid.org.uk/join



Yes, I want to join RNID

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) _____ First name _____

Surname _____

Address _____

Postcode _____ Email _____

Telephone _____ Textphone _____

Please accept my membership payment: (tick relevant boxes)

£22 standard rate (or £17.50 if you pay by direct debit)

£15 if you are retired, unwaged or a full-time student
(or £12.50 if you pay by direct debit)

I would like to make a donation of £ _____

I enclose a cheque/postal order made payable to RNID
(delete as appropriate)

I prefer to pay by credit card/debit card/CharityCard
(delete as appropriate)

Card number (Visa/Mastercard/Maestro/CharityCard)

Issue no

Signature _____ Expiry date ____ / ____

Please return this form to:

RNID, FREEPOST LON13186, London EC1B 1AL

Occasionally, we may want to let you know about the work we are doing. If you would prefer not to be contacted in this way please tick this box.

Occasionally, we will allow other organisations to contact you, but if you would prefer not to be contacted, please tick this box.

From time to time we would like to contact you by email. Please tick here if you would like to receive emails from us.



Where can I go for more information?

You may find our factsheets useful:

- Complementary therapies and tinnitus
- Drugs and tinnitus
- Equipment, sound therapy and tinnitus
- Living with someone who has tinnitus
- Low frequency noise
- Musical hallucinations
- Pulsatile tinnitus
- Therapies to help you with your tinnitus
- Tinnitus and children
- Tinnitus and relaxation
- Tinnitus and sleep

Contact RNID Tinnitus Helpline (see back page) if you would like copies of these. And please let us know if you would like these (or this leaflet) in Braille, large print or audio format.

British Tinnitus Association (BTA)

Contact the BTA for information, advice and support. The BTA:

- publishes information for people with tinnitus, including a quarterly magazine, *Quiet*
- encourages research into tinnitus and supports a network of local tinnitus groups around the country.

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

Telephone **0800 018 0527** Fax **0114 258 2279**
info@tinnitus.org.uk www.tinnitus.org.uk

The British Tinnitus Association (BTA) publishes information for people with tinnitus, including a quarterly magazine, *Quiet*. It also encourages research into tinnitus and supports a network of local tinnitus groups around the country.

We're RNID, the charity
working to change the world
for the UK's 9 million deaf
and hard of hearing people.

To find out more:

Go to

www.tuneouttinnitus.org.uk

Tinnitus Helpline

Telephone 0808 808 6666

Textphone 0808 808 0007

SMS 0780 0000 360

(costs vary depending on your network)

Or write to us

tinnitushelpline@rnid.org.uk

19-23 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8SL

Fax 020 7296 8199



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

RNID •

Changing the world for deaf
and hard of hearing people

2845R/0807 Photography Philip Meech
The Royal National Institute for Deaf People.
Registered Address 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.
Registered charity No. 207720. A company limited by guarantee in
England and Wales No. 454169.