

# Tinnitus

Tinnitus (“TIN-a-tus” or “Tin-EYE-tus”) is a “ringing in your ears” that other people do not hear. Tinnitus can sound like many different things—hissing, roaring, pulsing, whooshing, chirping, whistling, or clicking.

Tinnitus can occur all or some of the time in one ear or both ears.

## Is tinnitus common?

Yes. One third of all adults experience tinnitus at some point in their lives—periods of mild ringing or other sounds in the ear. Some people have more annoying types of tinnitus. For example, about 10%–15% of adults have prolonged or loud tinnitus requiring medical evaluation. The exact cause of tinnitus is often not known. One thing is certain: Tinnitus is real.

## Is tinnitus a disease?

No. Just as fever or headache go together with many different illnesses, tinnitus is a symptom common to many problems.

## What causes tinnitus?

Conditions that might cause tinnitus include:

- Hearing loss
- Loud noise exposure
- Drugs or medicines that are toxic to hearing (ototoxic)
- Head injury
- Ménière’s disease
- Migraine headaches
- Anemia
- Hypertension
- Too much wax in the ear
- Certain types of tumors

## Why is my tinnitus worse at night?

During the day, you are more distracted by activities and the sounds around you. This makes your tinnitus less noticeable. When your surroundings are quiet, your tinnitus can seem louder and more

bothersome. Fatigue and stress may also make your tinnitus worse.

## How is the cause of tinnitus diagnosed?

Tinnitus is a symptom of something else. As tinnitus is often caused by hearing loss, you should have a full hearing evaluation by an audiologist. You should also see your doctor to determine whether something else may be causing your tinnitus.

## Should I see an audiologist?

You should have an audiologist test your hearing to find out whether hearing loss is present. The audiologist should be certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Because tinnitus can be associated with several hearing-related conditions, the hearing (audiologic) evaluation can help provide information about the cause and treatment options for you.

## Can tinnitus be measured?

Tinnitus cannot be measured directly. The audiologist relies on information that you provide in describing your tinnitus. Your audiologist will perform tests that help estimate the frequency and loudness of your tinnitus. You will also be asked questions such as these:

- Is it in the right ear, left ear, or both?
- Is the ringing always there?
- When do you notice it more—day, night, or another time?
- Can you describe the sound or the ringing?
- Does the sound have a pitch to it? Is it a high pitch? Low pitch?
- How loud is your tinnitus?
- Does the sound change in volume or pitch over time?
- Do certain things make the tinnitus worse— such as when taking medicine or after noise exposure?
- Does the tinnitus affect your sleep? Your work? Your ability to concentrate?
- How annoying is it? Not at all or a lot?

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Your responses will allow the audiologist to give you information that will help you understand your tinnitus.

Knowing more about your tinnitus can be a great help. We often do not know exactly what caused the tinnitus. People are relieved when they understand what tinnitus is and, more important, what it is NOT. When the possible cause of your tinnitus is understood, your stress level (which can make tinnitus worse) is frequently reduced. You can “take charge” by anticipating, preventing, and changing situations that make your tinnitus worse.

## How is tinnitus treated?

The cause of your tinnitus will help to determine treatment. Tinnitus, in some cases, can be a symptom of a treatable medical condition. Unfortunately, in many cases, the cause of tinnitus cannot be identified, or medical or surgical treatment is not an option. In these cases, you can still manage the tinnitus using a variety of other methods. Be sure to discuss with your doctor any medical treatment options before considering tinnitus management.

Tinnitus management can include any of the following options:

- hearing aids
- biofeedback
- hypnosis
- electrical stimulation
- relaxation therapy
- counseling
- habituation therapies
- tinnitus sound generators
- sound machines

Audiologists and otolaryngologists (ear, nose, and throat doctors, or ENTs) routinely collaborate in identifying the cause of tinnitus and providing treatment and management. A treatment that is useful and successful for one person may not be appropriate for another.

The American Tinnitus Association ([www.ata.org](http://www.ata.org)) has information on various treatment options and provides support to those bothered by tinnitus.

## Will a hearing aid help my tinnitus?

If you have a hearing loss, there is a good chance that a hearing aid will both relieve your tinnitus and help you hear. Your ASHA-certified audiologist can assist with the selection, fitting, and purchase of the most appropriate hearing aids for you. Your audiologist will also help you learn how to get the best use out of your hearing aids.

## What is a tinnitus sound generator?

Tinnitus sound generators look like hearing aids and produce sounds that make tinnitus not seem as loud. The sound distracts and is usually easier to tolerate than tinnitus.

The ways that you describe your tinnitus (pitch, loudness, location, etc.) determine what kind of sound might bring relief. If you have a hearing loss as well as tinnitus, the sound generator and the hearing aid may operate together as one instrument.

Like all other treatments for tinnitus, sound generators are useful for some people but not for all people. As with a hearing aid, a careful evaluation by an audiologist will help decide whether a tinnitus sound generator will help you.

## Are there other devices that can help me?

Sound machines that provide a steady background of comforting noise can be useful at night or in a quiet environment. Fish tanks, fans, low-volume music, and indoor waterfalls can also be helpful. There are even applications for portable media players (iPod and MP3 players) that offer a variety of sounds that may reduce the annoyance of tinnitus.

## Should I join a self-help group?

Often, a self-help group promotes feelings of hope and control. Members of the group share



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strategies that they have found successful in dealing with their tinnitus. It can help to be reassured that you do not have a rare disease or serious brain disorder and that you are not going deaf. With support, people with tinnitus usually find that they can cope with their tinnitus.

Your audiologist can connect you with a self-help group in your area. For additional information or help in finding a group near you, contact the American Tinnitus Association ([www.ata.org](http://www.ata.org)).

Content contributed by ASHA members Candice Ortiz-Hawkins, AuD, CCC-A, and LaGuinn Sherlock, AuD, CCC-A.

For more information about balance problems, preventing falls, hearing loss, hearing aids, or referral to an ASHA-certified audiologist, contact:



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