

TINNITUS

Tinnitus is the term for the sensation of hearing a sound in the absence of any external sound. You might hear different types of sound, for example ringing, buzzing, whooshing or humming. These can be continuous or they can come and go. The tinnitus might seem like it's in one ear or both, in the middle of the head or even be difficult to pinpoint. Some people may think the noise is coming from outside and hunt for it until they discover it's actually inside them!

Did you know?

Tinnitus is very common and is reported in all age groups, even young children. About 30% of people will experience tinnitus at some point in their lives but the number of people who live with persistent tinnitus is approximately 10%. Tinnitus is more common in people who have hearing loss or other ear problems, but it can also be found in people with normal hearing.

What causes Tinnitus?

The exact causes of tinnitus are unknown however, what is known is that it is neither a disease nor an illness. Medical research suggests that tinnitus results from some type of change, either mental or physical, not necessarily related to hearing.

When we hear, sound travels into the ear and then the hearing nerves take the signals to the brain. The brain is then responsible for putting it all together and making sense of the sound. Because the ears don't know what's important and what's not, they send a lot of information to the brain. This is too much information for us to process, so the brain filters out a lot of unnecessary 'activity' and background sound, such as clocks ticking or traffic noise.

If there is a change in the system, for example a hearing loss or ear infection, the amount of information being sent to the brain changes. The brain then responds to this change in levels by trying to get more information from the ear, and the extra information you may get is the sound we call tinnitus. The tinnitus is therefore actually brain activity and not the ear itself! It is generally accepted that it isn't only a change in the ear that can result in tinnitus, but it could be due to a change in our stress levels, for example, with tinnitus being noticed after periods of significant stress, a change in life circumstances or general wellbeing.

People often say that they are aware of noises in the ears when they have a cold, an ear infection or wax blocking the ear. Sometimes people become

aware of tinnitus following a really stressful event and once they're aware of it, seem to notice it more and more, but this usually fades once these things have passed. However, some people continue to notice the tinnitus, for example after an infection has cleared up.

Can Tinnitus be treated?

When you first experience tinnitus, you may naturally be worried and very aware of this new sound. Hearing tinnitus for the first time can be quite frightening if you think it means that something is wrong with you, or that it might change your life. It's a new sensation and you need to give yourself time to adapt. Most people find that their tinnitus does seem to settle down after this initial period, even without doing anything in particular. You might hear this being referred to as habituation. It's a bit like walking into a room with a noisy fan or air conditioner. Initially, it seems really loud and then after a while, you stop noticing it as much. Tinnitus can often be much the same – initially, it's more noticeable but you gradually notice it less than you did.

If you think you have Tinnitus the first person to talk to is your Doctor. You may need to be referred to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Surgeon or an Audiovestibular Physician, who will rule out any medical factors, assess your hearing and probably give you some information about what tinnitus is and how best to manage it. Some hospitals have hearing therapists or specially trained audiologists who are available to offer more support, if you need it.

You will also need to inform your Line Manager as the condition could impact on your ability to carry out your duties particularly if it relates to a hearing issue.

Want more information?

There is lots of information available about Tinnitus in particular the British Tinnitus Association offer some useful guidance on actions you can take to help manage it. To find out more visit their website; <https://www.tinnitus.org.uk>