

Tinnitus in young people

Information for young people, parents and carers

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a sound that you hear in your ears or your head which comes from your own body.

You may hear a ringing, hissing, buzzing, humming or whooshing sound. It doesn't matter what sound (or sounds) that you hear- if you can hear it, even with your fingers in your ears, then you are hearing tinnitus.

You may hear tinnitus in one of your ears or you may hear it in both of your ears. Some people hear their tinnitus sound like it's coming from their head rather than their ears. For some people it is a constant sound or it is heard from time to time. For some other people it may sound like their heartbeat.

Becoming aware of your own tinnitus sound can happen to anybody. Everybody has the ability to hear tinnitus. Some people don't seem to be very aware of their tinnitus however, some people find that the sound their body is making causes them to become very upset.

Why do I hear tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a normal sound that your body produces every day. Your brain listens to everything around you all of the time and it figures out what is important to listen to and what can be ignored. For example: Your brain might ignore a dripping tap; a ticking clock; or it might not even notice the noise the traffic makes from the busy road outside. The reason it ignores these sounds is because at that moment your brain has decided that they are not very interesting.

We have a really clever system in our body that helps us stay safe. Without trying, our body notices anything that our brain thinks could be dangerous. When we think something is dangerous, our bodies try to protect us by making us very alert and ready to take action. This works really well for us if we need to run away from danger. For example: if you were in a jungle and you heard a twig "snap", although it's a small sound your brain might really highlight that sound to you in case it's a hungry tiger looking to catch you. When you hear it, your body helps you get ready to fight or run away fast- and this helps you stay safe from the tiger.

You might notice a ringing sound in your ear one day. When your brain notices that sound as upsetting or dangerous, it works really hard to keep you safe. Once that happens it often listens more for it. When you hear that sound again you might become upset by it again, so your brain gets another message that this is a dangerous sound and it listens more and more for it. The more your brain listens for the tinnitus sound, the more you will hear it because your body is trying very hard to keep you safe. But what your body has forgotten is that tinnitus is a normal sound, and because it's normal, it's not dangerous.

Is tinnitus a disease?

As you have just learned, tinnitus is a normal sound that your body would naturally ignore. This means that tinnitus is not a disease. While tinnitus is not a disease, many people find that hearing tinnitus is upsetting. We can work together to try to help you become less upset about hearing it.

Am I the only person who hears tinnitus?

You might be surprised to find out that in a room of 100 people, up to 15 of those people have heard tinnitus.

What can I do to help myself?

So far, you have found out that tinnitus is a normal sound produced by your body. You also now understand that your brain has become very interested in this sound because it wants to keep you safe. One very good way of helping yourself hear tinnitus less is by adding a quiet noise that you like in the background. This could be your favourite music or even a fan. The trick is to have the sound that you have chosen a little bit quieter than the tinnitus sound. This will allow your brain to listen to the interesting sound that you have chosen and then learn to ignore the tinnitus sound.

I can't sleep

You might find your tinnitus sound becomes louder at night time. This is because when you try to sleep your environment tends to be quieter so your brain notices tinnitus a bit more. You can do a few things to help yourself if you think tinnitus stops you from sleeping.

One way you can help yourself is to play some gentle, soothing music. Learning to relax before bed time can also help- so you may have to avoid exciting computer games, TV or reading a stimulating book just before bedtime. Establishing a relaxing winding-down routine will help you find a way to sleep better.

Why does the tinnitus noise get worse when I feel unhappy?

It might be useful for you to know that people who are bothered by tinnitus can sometimes feel like it gets a bit worse during stressful times such as during exam periods or if you have had a fall out with family or friends. Stress, anxiety and tinnitus are linked. Since we know this, it might also be helpful for you to know that finding ways to improve wellness and relaxation will help you. Learning some good coping strategies is a great way to help yourself. For example, if you are feeling stressed and your tinnitus is getting louder– why not stop what you are doing and think of something fun or relaxing to do instead? There are lots of different ways you can help yourself and we can talk about this more if you need some suggestions.

What if my hearing is affected?

Sometimes people can hear tinnitus because their hearing is reduced. As part of your appointment, we will do an assessment to find out how well you hear. If there is a hearing concern, we will talk together about this and find a way forward that can help your tinnitus and your hearing levels. Tinnitus cannot cause a hearing problem, but helping a hearing problem can help tinnitus.

How can I protect my ears?

Most everyday noises are absolutely fine for you to hear. You might have noticed that your ears ring after being in a very loud environment such as a loud concert, playing in a band or being at a loud party. This is a temporary situation and after a day or so your ears should go back to normal. It's important for you to know that staying in a very noisy environment like this for long times may damage your hearing. If you think you will be in a very loud environment for a long period of time, you might want to consider wearing something that could protect your hearing from the noise.