



National  
Association  
for Deaf People



Questions about Tinnitus

## What is Tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the term for noises which are heard “in the ears” or “in the head” – buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing, and other sounds which do not come from an external source. It is a very common symptom, affecting up to one in ten of the adult population. Children can also experience Tinnitus, but fortunately it is rarely distressing to them. It can happen to those with average hearing as well as to deaf or hard of hearing people. It is also quite possible to have a very marked hearing loss without any Tinnitus at all.



## What causes Tinnitus?

There can be many causes, but the two major ones are related to hearing disorders associated with ageing, and exposure to loud noise. It can also develop following an emotional upset, an illness, injury or infection which may not be related to the hearing mechanism. It can also appear as a reaction to or side effect of a drug. Situations such as this can damage or over stimulate tiny hair cells in the inner ear, sending an irregular, unbalanced stream of nerve signals to the brain, which perceives it as Tinnitus.

## Is there a cure?

Occasionally the cause of Tinnitus is treatable, for example antibiotics can clear up an infection of the middle ear; wax can be removed from a blocked ear; minor surgery may eliminate some cases of Tinnitus.

Where there is permanent damage to the function of the inner ear hair cells, there is currently no wonder drug or operations which will immediately get rid of the Tinnitus. There are however, a number of ways to get significant relief from Tinnitus, and it is nearly always possible with appropriate treatment to reduce the distress that Tinnitus can causes.

## How can I find out more?

Contact:

The Irish Tinnitus Association  
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## NAD National Office

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See our leaflet for our Resource Centres and Outreach Centres

*Check out our range of leaflets or visit our website at [www.nadi.ie](http://www.nadi.ie) for further information.*

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## Where can I get expert help and advice?

Your GP can carry out initial examination to check for wax, infection, and so on, and may suggest ways of dealing with your tinnitus. If you'd like a further examination he/she can refer you to a consultant, either through a local hospital's Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) department or privately.

## What help is available from ENT departments and Tinnitus Clinics?

Many people will find a thorough consultation, examination and diagnosis from a specialist reassuring. The specialist may recommend and arrange treatment which could, depending on the cause, include:

- A hearing aid – even if there is only slight hearing loss the use of a hearing aid may reduce or mask Tinnitus.
- A Tinnitus masker (sometimes called a white noise generator) – a device which looks like a hearing aid and generates a quiet, gentle sound of its own. This gives the ear something else to listen to and diverts the attention of the listener from the Tinnitus so that it moves into the background. It may be used as part as retraining therapy, altering the brain's perception of Tinnitus.
- Relaxation therapy, such as stress management and relaxation tapes.
- Counselling – an essential part of any successful Tinnitus management.
- medication for the effect of Tinnitus (e.g. anxiety, sleeping problems, depression)
- surgery for abnormalities in blood or muscles in or near the ear



### What makes Tinnitus worse?

Many people with Tinnitus are not distressed by it – it is simply something which is there, which does not affect their lives. Those who do become distressed generally find their Tinnitus threatening in some way, seeing it (quite wrongly) as being caused by a serious disease, or a going on forever, getting louder, and finally driving them mad. These beliefs may lead magnifying their Tinnitus. Most people find that their Tinnitus goes up and down – it may be aggravated by stress, loud noise, certain drugs (particularly aspirin and quinine) and excesses of or reactions to some foods and drinks (notably caffeine and alcohol), but it doesn't usually get worse with time alone.

### How can I alleviate my Tinnitus?

It is important to remove its threatening qualities, and this can be often only be achieved by counselling from someone who really knows about Tinnitus. Anxiety and tension can make Tinnitus much worse, so learning how to relax is important – perhaps by joining a relaxation or yoga class and teaching yourself relaxation techniques.

### Is there anything else I can do?



If you find that some things you eat or drink have an effect on your Tinnitus, you could adjust your diet. You should wear proper ear protection – ear muffs or plugs, not cotton wool stuffed in the ears – in very noisy situations (for example, when using power tools or near noisy music, which can damage the ears and make Tinnitus worse).

Having something else more pleasant and interesting to listen to, such as music, TV or radio, can prove a valuable distraction to Tinnitus and help 'mask' its noise. Many people with Tinnitus say that it 'isn't there' when they're not listening to it – Tinnitus is a very real noise, but if you're not tuned to it can be much less a problem.

### Will 'alternative' treatments help my Tinnitus?

Some people with Tinnitus have reported that Acupuncture, hypnotherapy, homeopathy and other 'complementary' therapies have been of benefit. Although they probably have no direct effect

on the ear, they may result in reduced tension, anxiety and depression, and better sleep – which can have a secondary beneficial effect on the Tinnitus. Most 'alternative' treatments are only available privately, but some maybe available through your local Health Board. Check with your GP for services in your area.



### Does Tinnitus affect children?

Although Tinnitus occurs more in people in their middle or later years, it can affect younger people too, including children who tend to complain much less about symptoms and to accept them more readily. With any ear problem, in children it is important to seek specialist help – symptoms can often be effectively treated.



### Does Tinnitus cause deafness?

Research indicates that Tinnitus does not cause deafness, although they may both have the same cause, particularly noise damage to the ears. Tinnitus may affect your ability to concentrate, so you could 'miss' conversation. The needless fear that Tinnitus does cause deafness can make Tinnitus louder.