

TINNITUS

Understanding and dealing with 'ringing' in the ears



If you have ever heard a buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing or pulsing sound in your ears then you've probably had tinnitus. Tinnitus refers to sounds which do not come from an external source but can be heard in the ears or head.



Tinnitus is extremely common. Most of us experience it at some time in our lives. It usually just lasts a short time, such as after working in a noisy environment, going to a rock concert or loud club, or listening carefully in a quiet room. But sometimes tinnitus can be persistent and should be checked out by a specialist.

What causes tinnitus?

Although tinnitus is often associated with a hearing loss, it doesn't mean you're going deaf. There are a number of causes which may trigger tinnitus, including:

- Middle ear infection
- Dental or jaw problems
- Some medications
- Exposure to loud noises
- Inner ear damage
- Hearing loss.

The tinnitus itself will not cause a hearing loss or other illness.

Persistent tinnitus is often triggered or made worse by emotional events, such as bereavement, stress, accident and injury (not necessarily of the ear), or moving from a noisy environment to a much quieter one. It may start during a period of depression or anxiety.

Severe tinnitus may have a significant impact on lifestyle.

It can interfere with sleep, relationships and functionality.

Sufferers may require extended medical support and possibly counselling, as it can lead to depression. You can seek guidance through your GP.

Who has tinnitus?

Tinnitus is more common in people who have a hearing impairment. If you find it difficult to hear, communication is often a strain. This 'straining to hear' means the subconscious focuses on picking up anything coming from the inner ear.

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Everyone has background noise in their hearing system. The perception and loudness of tinnitus depends on whether the brain suppresses these sounds or amplifies them because of their importance as a real or potential threat.

A small number of people also get discomfort with outside sounds. Why?

When the brain processes incoming sound, it may enhance it in the same way it does for tinnitus signals. In this case, normal sounds, and especially those that sound like tinnitus, are exaggerated. This results in oversensitive hearing, or hyperacusis. It also occurs without tinnitus and with completely normal hearing.

What can be done about tinnitus?

- The first step is to consult your doctor who may refer you to an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist to investigate the cause.

- An audiologist can test your hearing and provide you with more information about the tinnitus. If you have a hearing loss, hearing aids may help ease the strain of hearing and assist you to gradually ignore the tinnitus.
- Stress heightens the brain's sensitivity to all sounds and has a significant impact on the perception of tinnitus.

It's worth assessing your stress levels and making sure your lifestyle includes enough leisure.

- Tinnitus is always more noticeable when it's quiet. Introduce low level, enjoyable or unobtrusive sounds, such as music or an open window, which may help mask the tinnitus.

Tinnitus management

New approaches to help people with tinnitus have had successful results in Australia, Europe and the USA. Our goal is to assist people reduce the perception of tinnitus so that it's no longer annoying or intrusive.

If you are eligible for an Australian Hearing program, we provide:

- Education about tinnitus
- Hearing assessment
- Hearing aid fitting if appropriate
- Counselling and management strategies for getting used to the tinnitus
- Further referral to specialist programs if required.

Getting support

There are tinnitus support groups, including the Australian Tinnitus Association (www.tinnitus.asn.au) in most Australian States.

How Australian Hearing can help

Australian Hearing is the largest hearing services provider in Australia, and offers a range of leading hearing aid technology to provide eligible people with the best possible hearing solutions to manage their hearing impairment and deliver a better quality of life.

Australian Hearing provides subsidised hearing services for eligible people. For full details of our eligibility criteria visit www.hearing.com.au or contact your nearest hearing centre on **131 797**.