

TINNITUS OVERVIEW

Tinnitus is the perception of a ringing, buzzing, hissing, or roaring sound in one or both ears. It may be continuous or intermittent (occasional), can be pulsing or steady, and can range in severity from a soft buzz to a loud ring.

Although tinnitus can be annoying, it is not usually a sign of a serious problem. There are ways to mask and adapt to the symptoms to minimize the impact of tinnitus on daily life.

TINNITUS CAUSES

Tinnitus is often caused by damage to the tiny hairs on auditory cells within the inner ear. When the cells are damaged or stressed, they change the signal they send to the brain. Sometimes this produces a noise heard only by the patient. Damage to the hair cells can be a result of normal aging, or it can occur after exposure to very loud noise, certain medications, injury, or disease. Sometimes the damage is temporary but the noise is permanent.

Occasionally tinnitus can be a result of problems not related to the hearing system. Disorders of the jaw joint (called the temporomandibular joint), severe anxiety, and neck injuries can cause tinnitus.

Age-related hearing loss — Normal hearing loss often occurs with advancing age and is frequently accompanied by tinnitus.

Noise-induced hearing loss — Prolonged exposure to excessively loud noise (eg, from chainsaws, gunfire, or even loud music) may lead to temporary or permanent hearing loss and tinnitus. A short blast of loud noise also can cause severe to profound hearing loss, pain, or hyperacusis (abnormal sensitivity to noise).

Other causes of auditory system dysfunction — There are many auditory problems that can lead to hearing loss and tinnitus. These include use of certain medications, stiffening of the bones in the middle ear (otosclerosis), tumors within the auditory system, blood vessels or neurologic disorders, and genetic or inherited inner ear disorders.

TINNITUS SYMPTOMS

A high-pitched steady tone (ringing) is the most common form of tinnitus. Other symptoms can include a pulsation that is rushing or humming and varies in intensity with exercise or changing of body position. A clicking sound may indicate a nerve or muscle abnormality.

TINNITUS MANAGEMENT

The management of tinnitus involves treating any underlying disorders or abnormalities as well as addressing the tinnitus itself. Although there is no cure for most cases of chronic tinnitus, there are ways to manage the condition.

PROGNOSIS

The impact of tinnitus on everyday life varies, often depending upon the severity of the tinnitus noise. About 25 percent of sufferers report an increase in tinnitus severity over time. Long-term tinnitus is unlikely to go away completely. However, it often becomes less bothersome over time, especially when hearing loss is also present.