

## Questions and Answers About Tinnitus

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**What is Tinnitus?** Tinnitus is an auditory sensation that does not have an acoustic source outside of the body. Most patients with tinnitus complain that their tinnitus is constant, or present much of the time.

**What Does Tinnitus Sound Like?** The majority of patients describe their tinnitus as “tonal.” Many also describe their tinnitus as sounding “noisy.” Tinnitus can be one sound or multiple sounds. There is great variation in the tinnitus sounds that patients hear.

**How Loud is Tinnitus?** The loudness of tinnitus also varies between patients. Patients who report their tinnitus is “loud” tend to have the greatest problem with their tinnitus. Patients who report “soft” tinnitus tend to ignore it most of the time.

**What Causes Tinnitus?** The most common cause of tinnitus is exposure to loud noise. Anything that can cause a hearing loss can also cause (or worsen) tinnitus. Causes of tinnitus include injuries to the head and neck, diseases of the head and neck, medications (“ototoxic” drugs), and some medical conditions. In many cases, patients do not know what caused their tinnitus. It seems that tinnitus can sometimes be triggered simply by stress.

**How Many People Have Tinnitus?** Most studies agree that about one out of every 10 adults has tinnitus. It tends to be more common in men and in people who work in noisy occupations.

**How Does Tinnitus Affect People?** About four out of five people who experience tinnitus are not particularly bothered by it. For one out of five, the tinnitus is a significant problem that can range from mild to very severe. The most common problems that tinnitus patients report are difficulties with concentration, sleep, and emotional reactions. Although many people report that tinnitus causes hearing difficulties, this usually is not the case (it is more likely a hearing loss).

**If I Have Tinnitus, What Should I Do?** The most important step is to receive a hearing evaluation, which can be done by an audiologist. The audiologist can: (1) detect any problems that would indicate the need for an appointment with an otolaryngologist; (2) determine if there is a hearing problem, and provide any needed treatment for hearing loss; (3) provide information about the tinnitus and suggest options for treatment if needed.

**How is Tinnitus Evaluated?** A tinnitus evaluation typically includes a hearing assessment, special tinnitus questionnaires, and measures of tinnitus loudness, pitch, and its ability to be masked. Other specialized tests may be needed.

**When is Treatment Needed for Tinnitus?** The tinnitus evaluation often indicates that no treatment is needed. Some patients require only some basic information about their tinnitus. Other patients require a full treatment program.

**How is Tinnitus Treated?** There are many forms of treatment for tinnitus. The tinnitus patient must be cautious in the selection of treatment, as many methods have no scientific basis. It is best to start out with education about tinnitus. Some basic suggestions are provided below for self-help techniques. If long-term treatment is necessary, there are methods that involve different forms of counseling, the use of sound to manage tinnitus, hearing aids, and special ear-level devices. These methods, if conducted properly by an experienced clinician, can be effective for many patients.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TODAY ABOUT MY TINNITUS?**

- **Avoid loud noise.** Loud noise can make your tinnitus temporarily or permanently worse. Protect yourself from loud noise such as, loud music, power tools, chain saws, guns, and factory noise. When you are around these types of loud noises use earplugs or earmuffs.
- **Avoid total silence.** Being in a quiet room may make your tinnitus more noticeable. To help with this, try being around low-volume, pleasant sounds, such as music or nature sounds (especially water). Devices that produce sound include radios, CD players, tabletop fountains, sound generators, and electric fans.
- **Lifestyle changes that might help:**
  - Reduce excessive use of caffeine, alcohol, salt, aspirin, and nicotine
  - Reduce stress as much as possible
  - Get adequate sleep
  - Keep your mind and body busy with meaningful activities
  - Establish a healthy diet
  - Exercise regularly

### **Where can I learn more about tinnitus?**

Many sources of information are available in books, on the Internet, and through various organizations. Some resources are listed below. Contact your local VA Audiology Clinic for further information.

American Tinnitus Association; [www.ata.org](http://www.ata.org) PO Box 5, Portland OR 97207-0005 (800) 634-8978 or (503) 248-9985

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