

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus describes the noises that some people hear “in their ears” or “in their heads”. The noises can take many forms with descriptions ranging from whistling, humming and ringing to droning, roaring or throbbing.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus is not a disease or an illness but a symptom of an irregularity in the hearing system. It is quite common and can result from wax in the ears, raised blood pressure, anaemia, or simply a symptom of the ageing process. It can accompany deafness or balance problems or there could be no other signs of anything wrong with the ears. The precise nature of the mechanism causing tinnitus is still not fully understood. **People with NF2 commonly experience tinnitus.**

Managing tinnitus

Most people who have tinnitus gradually come to terms with the noises. The brain has the ability to block out some sounds while emphasising others, for example: the hum of the fridge or the distant roar of the motorway can be ignored in favour of more important sounds such as a baby’s cry or the sound of television and we learn to filter out unwanted noises that we do not perceive as threatening.

There is currently no drug treatment available for tinnitus, although treating the stress, anxiety, insomnia and depression that aggravates it can help.

Self help is an important part of managing tinnitus. Anxiety and tension will make it worse and learning to relax helps to break down the cycle of listening to the tinnitus. It can also alleviate feelings of distress and helplessness. Whichever method of relaxation is used, it is important to remember that learning to relax properly is a gradual process that needs to be practised until it becomes a natural part of living.

It is also important to avoid long periods of silence. If you have hearing, the use of comforting background sounds, either in the room or via in-ear headphones four hours or more a day and at night, aids relaxation and focuses attention away from the tinnitus. There are a number of free-standing devices and tapes available that produce soothing noises, for example: sea waves, birds, rain and heartbeat. Information about these can be obtained from the RNID Tinnitus Helpline.

If you have partial hearing a hearing aid might be useful to enhance normal background sounds and make the tinnitus less intrusive. Advice about your suitability for using a hearing aid can be obtained from an Audiologist or Hearing Therapist.

Tinnitus Retraining Therapy is a long-term course of remedial treatment that has two parts.

The first aims to remove beliefs and fears about tinnitus and allay anxieties. The second supplements the counselling by providing a low level of background sound by noise generators or hearing aid-like devices worn on or in the ear. Your ENT Department will tell you if it is available in your area and whether you would be suitable for this treatment.

Some dos and don'ts

Do take plenty of exercise	Don't exercise near bedtime. It will stimulate you and stop you sleeping.
Do go to bed when you feel sleepy and not just because it is a certain time. If you are not asleep within 20 to 30 minutes get up and do something quiet and relaxing such as reading.	Don't sleep in the day. Cat-napping does not improve sleep patterns and you are more likely to experience trouble getting to sleep at night.
Do be aware of noise levels. In loud and busy places, be careful. Take breaks away from the noisiest areas and think about wearing earplugs if the noise hurts.	Don't go to bed in a totally quiet room. Environmental sounds like the humming of a fan or ticking of a clock will help distract you from the tinnitus.
Do eat a healthy, varied diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables. Avoid too much cheese and chocolate. Reduce salt intake.	Don't drink too much coffee, tea or coke as caffeine can have an adverse effect on tinnitus, making it louder.
Do have the occasional drink if you want to. Alcohol, in moderation, can help you to relax but excess alcohol can induce tinnitus.	Don't take aspirin unless it has been recommended by a doctor. Try using paracetamol instead.
Do allow yourself plenty of time for doing things like keeping an appointment, shopping, visiting friends and doing the housework. Increased stress levels might increase the tinnitus.	Don't think too much about your tinnitus. By dwelling on it you will be drawing your attention to the noises in your ears and it might sound worse.

Further information on managing tinnitus can be obtained from a Hearing Therapist. Your ENT Consultant or Audiology Department at your local hospital should be able to tell you how to get a referral. For advice and support contact:

The British Tinnitus Association (BTA)
 Telephone 0114 279 6600
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 Website: www.tinnitus.org.uk

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The RNID Tinnitus Helpline
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For more information and a full list of publications please contact:

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