

**Taking action on tinnitus**  
How to manage the noises  
in your ears and head

**ACTION ON**  
**HEARING**  
**LOSS**

**TUNE OUT**  
**TINNITUS**

In this leaflet we explain what tinnitus is and how to manage it. But if you've got more questions, our friendly helpline team is waiting to answer your call or email.

**Telephone 0808 808 0123**

**Textphone 0808 808 9000**

**Email [information@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information@hearingloss.org.uk)**

### **You should read this leaflet if you have tinnitus, think you may have tinnitus or know someone with tinnitus.**

We will tell you:

- what tinnitus is and what it might sound like
- what are the common causes of tinnitus
- the link between sensitivity to sound and tinnitus
- about treatment and getting help
- ways of managing tinnitus.

And if you need more help, contact us for free information (see our contact details opposite).

We can give you:

- further information on tinnitus
- free factsheets and leaflets
- contact details of your nearest hospital tinnitus clinics, plus useful organisations, support groups and self-help groups.

### **Medical disclaimer**

The information given in this leaflet is not medical advice and, by providing, it neither Action on Hearing Loss nor our tinnitus and medical advisers undertake any responsibility for your medical care, nor accept you as a patient. Before acting on any of the information contained in this leaflet, or deciding on a course of treatment, you should discuss the matter with your GP (family doctor) or other medical professional who is treating you.

### What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a medical term to describe noise(s) that people can hear in one ear, both ears or in the head – such as ringing, buzzing or whistling. The sounds heard can vary from person to person, but the common link is that they do not have an external source.

### What does tinnitus sound like?

Tinnitus sounds can take a variety of forms such as buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing or a range of other sounds. For some people it can even sound like music or singing. Sometimes, people only notice these sounds when it is very quiet, such as at night. Other people find that they are much louder and can intrude on everyday life.

Sometimes tinnitus noise beats in time with your pulse. This is known as pulsatile tinnitus. See our other factsheets on tinnitus for more information.

### How common is tinnitus?

Most people have experienced brief periods of tinnitus at some time. It is quite common to have it for a short while after you have been exposed to loud noise – for example, after a music concert.

### What causes tinnitus?

There are many different causes of tinnitus. We know that tinnitus can be linked to:

- exposure to loud noise
- hearing loss
- ear or head injuries
- some diseases of the ear
- ear infections
- emotional stress
- a side effect of medication, or a combination of any of the above.

Many people with tinnitus have never experienced any of the above and don't have a hearing loss. There are several theories and ongoing research as to how tinnitus is generated.

To understand what happens when you have tinnitus, you need to understand how your ear works.

### The hearing pathway

The ear is made up of three parts: the outer, middle and inner ear. These parts of the ear change sound waves around you into nerve signals, which then travel up the hearing nerve to the brain. Once the signals reach the hearing part of the brain, known as the auditory cortex, you will hear them as sound.

The hearing pathway has a complex filtering system that allows you to 'tune in' to sounds that have meaning to you and 'filter out' sounds that do not. For example, you may not notice the

## Tune out tinnitus

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background noise of traffic, but you would notice the sound of a baby crying. This system works all the time and stops you being bombarded with sound.

Your brain also has systems that respond to the meaning of sounds and help influence the way that you filter them. For example, if you hear your name at a party, you will tune in to hear what is being said. This is because the sound of your name is especially meaningful to you. Together, these filters and response systems help to control how you react to sound.

### The tinnitus signal

Your hearing pathway, your filters and your sound response systems are all involved when you hear tinnitus. First, a tinnitus signal is created, usually in your inner ear or the auditory nerve. This is usually very weak and most people don't notice it. However, if you become aware of tinnitus, this means that your filters have started to pick up this tinnitus signal.

If you become anxious or annoyed by tinnitus, your sound response systems will tune your filters into it and you will start to hear it more. The aim of tinnitus management is to help you learn to not focus in on the sound of your tinnitus.

### Why do I feel sensitive to sound?

Around 40% of people with tinnitus are also more sensitive than normal to everyday sounds.

Broadly speaking, there are two forms of sensitivity to sound:

- Hyperacusis – you may find sound in general or certain sounds uncomfortable or painfully loud, even when they don't bother other people.

- Misophonia or noise annoyance – you may find some sounds extremely irritating, even though you may not be particularly sensitive to sounds in general. If your dislike is strong enough, the term phonophobia is used.

For more information, see our factsheet *Hyperacusis*.

### Can tinnitus be treated?

There is currently no treatment for tinnitus that works in the same way for everyone. But it is sometimes possible to treat the underlying condition that may be causing it. For example, if you have an ear infection, antibiotics may help clear this up, which may in turn improve the tinnitus.

If the tinnitus is linked to a particular medicine you are taking, it may stop if you change or stop taking that medicine. But you must ask your GP before you change your medicine, alter your dose or stop taking it altogether. It is also important to let your GP know if you are taking any over-the-counter drugs.

### Where can I go for help?

The first person you need to see is your GP. They will check that your ears are free from wax and infection and may refer you to the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department at your hospital.

Although GPs are trained to a high level in a wide area of medicine, they are not tinnitus experts and their knowledge about treatments for tinnitus may vary.

When some people visit their GP about tinnitus they may find it difficult to get a referral to an ENT department. Make sure you tell your doctor that the tinnitus is a problem and how it is affecting you. For example, is it making you feel stressed,

or giving you sleep problems? Are you finding it difficult to cope? It may be useful to take along some leaflets or factsheets about tinnitus, such as this one. Contact us (see page 2) for free copies. If you still can't get a referral, try seeing a different doctor in the practice or even changing to a different practice altogether. You have the right to a second opinion. Most GPs are helpful and it is worth seeking their help.

### What will happen at the hospital?

First, you will see a specialist at the ENT department. It is important to have a thorough check-up to see if there are any obvious causes of your tinnitus. You may then be referred to a tinnitus clinic if there is one in your area. These are usually run by staff from the audiology department.

Some hospitals have specialist tinnitus centres or clinics, but services vary depending on where you live. Some areas may offer a limited tinnitus service or, in some cases, no service at all. Getting an NHS appointment may sometimes involve delays and waiting lists, so be prepared to wait.

Contact us (see page 3) to find out where your nearest clinic is.

### How do audiology departments help?

Your specialist may suggest you try habituation therapy. This changes your sound response systems so that you gradually become less aware of the tinnitus. Habituation therapy can involve:

- counselling
- hearing aid(s)
- relaxation or sound therapy.

### How can counselling help?

Counselling is a very important part of tinnitus management. It can help you understand your tinnitus better. Talking about tinnitus and how it makes you feel can also be very helpful.

### How can hearing aids help?

If you have a hearing loss, hearing aids can help with tinnitus management by:

- helping to compensate for your hearing loss
- stopping you straining to hear
- helping you concentrate on the background sounds around you rather than listening to your tinnitus sound.

All these will help distract your brain from paying attention to tinnitus.

### What is sound therapy?

Sound therapy is also known as sound enrichment. Many people find that they are more aware of tinnitus in a quiet environment. Sound therapy works by filling the silence with therapeutic sounds.

These distract you from listening to your tinnitus, making it less noticeable and, therefore, less intrusive. This helps your filters to tune out tinnitus. Sound therapy involves listening to a range of sounds that you find pleasant, such as recordings of nature sounds, or by using a sound generator, or home sound system.

See our factsheet about *Therapies to help with your tinnitus*.

### How do sound generators work?

A sound generator produces a gentle, soft 'rush' (white noise) which sounds like an off-tune, or off-station, radio. This can help retrain your brain to ignore tinnitus. The volume should be set at just below the level of the tinnitus. You can get different styles of sound generator. Sound generators that you wear in your ear look like hearing aids. You may not be offered all styles on the NHS as availability varies throughout the country. It will also depend on what is most appropriate for your needs.

## What other sounds can help?

Some people find everyday sounds helpful, such as the television, radio, an electric fan or music. You may have to experiment until you find the sort of music that works best for you. Ideally, the music shouldn't be too stimulating or emotional. Some people find natural sounds helpful, such as the sea, the rainforest or birds, either on their own or combined with pleasant music.

Be careful not to cover the sound of the tinnitus by playing any of these sounds too loudly. However, at night you may find it useful to use background sound to help you get to sleep.

We sell many products and a range of CDs that create sounds to help you relax, sleep and manage your tinnitus. Contact us (see back page) for more information and a copy of our *Solutions* catalogue.

## Why is relaxation important?

A regular relaxation routine can help you manage the stress that is often associated with tinnitus. Many people notice their tinnitus more when they are worried or tired, and this in turn increases their levels of anxiety and stress.

You can learn to control your responses to stress by using relaxation techniques. These are taught in many tinnitus clinics and audiology departments, or try local adult education classes in relaxation techniques, or classes in meditation or yoga.

See our factsheet *Tinnitus, sleep and complementary therapies* for more information.

### Can children get tinnitus?

Yes, children may be born with tinnitus or develop it in the same way that adults do. Children born with tinnitus or who develop it at a very young age may not realise it is unusual and assume all children experience these sounds. They often do not have the words to describe their tinnitus until they reach school age. As with any childhood ear problem, get specialist help as soon as possible by contacting your child's GP.

See our factsheet *Tinnitus, family life and ways to cope*.



## Want to know more?

Are you affected by hearing loss or tinnitus? Joining Action on Hearing Loss is a great way to:

- keep updated on developments
- find out about the new products that can help
- hear about the latest information and advice
- share your experiences of hearing loss with other members.

As a member we'll update you six times a year, through our award-winning membership magazine. If you're retired, membership costs just £15 a year.

## How to join

Complete the form on the reverse and return to us.

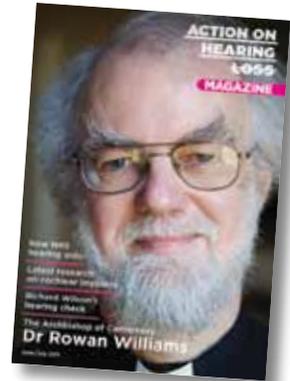
Alternatively:

- visit [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin) or
- call 0845 634 0679 (telephone) or 020 7296 8001 ext. 8256 (textphone)
- email [membership@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:membership@hearingloss.org.uk)

Contact us for more information:

**Action on Hearing Loss**  
**19-23 Featherstone Street**  
**London EC1Y 8SL**

**[membership@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:membership@hearingloss.org.uk)**  
**[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin)**



## Yes, I want to join

# **ACTION ON HEARING LOSS**

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) \_\_\_\_\_

First name \_\_\_\_\_

Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Textphone \_\_\_\_\_

## Please accept my membership payment:

(tick relevant boxes)

£22 standard rate

£15 if you are retired, unwaged or a full-time student

In addition, I would like to make a donation of £ \_\_\_\_\_

### Payment method:

I enclose a cheque/PO made payable to  
Action on Hearing Loss (delete as appropriate)

I prefer to pay by credit card/debit card/CharityCard  
(delete as appropriate)

Card number

Start date   /   Expiry date   /

Issue number (if present)   Security number

(last 3 digits on signature strip)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to: Action on Hearing Loss,  
FREEPOST LON13186, London EC1B 1AL

Please tick here  if you would like to receive emails from us including  
your membership email every two months.

Occasionally, we may want to let you know about the work we are doing.  
If you would prefer not to be contacted in this way, please tick this box.

Occasionally, we will allow other organisations to contact you,  
but if you would prefer not to be contacted, please tick this box.



## Where can I go for more information?

You might find some of our other factsheets or leaflets useful. Please contact the Information Line for free copies:

- **Different types of tinnitus - and what to do about them**
- **Drugs, stress and tinnitus**
- **Therapies to help with your tinnitus**
- **Tinnitus, family life and ways to cope**
- **Tinnitus, sleep and complementary therapies**

Please contact our Information Line (see back page) for free copies of these. And let us know if you would like any of them - or this leaflet - in Braille, large print or audio format.

**We're the charity taking action on hearing loss since 1911. We can't do this without your help.**

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**To find out more about what we do and how you can support us go to [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk)**

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**Email [information@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information@hearingloss.org.uk)**

**Action on Hearing Loss is the trading name of The Royal National Institute for Deaf People.**  
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