Patient information from the BMJ Group

Tinnitus

Having tinnitus can be annoying and upsetting. There is no single treatment that will make it go away completely. There are lots of things you can do to cope with tinnitus, so it does not interfere with your life.

What is tinnitus?

If you have tinnitus you hear ringing or other sounds in your ears most of the time, when there is nothing outside causing the noise. It doesn't harm your ears. Some people hear the sounds in both ears and some people hear them in one ear only.

Tinnitus is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Lots of different things can cause it. Some causes of tinnitus are:

- Damage to the ear from being exposed to loud noise (for example, from machinery or music)
- Ear infection or blockage (for example, from ear wax)
- Some antibiotics, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, diuretics, and drugs for cancer
- The condition Menière’s disease. This can also cause dizziness and hearing loss
- A type of benign (non-cancerous) growth called an acoustic neuroma. These slow-growing lumps can cause tinnitus if they press on the nerve that carries sounds to the brain.

Many people who get tinnitus have lost some of their hearing.

What are the symptoms?

You may hear these noises in your ears: ringing, roaring, clicking, hissing, and buzzing.

The sounds happen most of the time, but they can come and go. If the tinnitus is very bad, it may be difficult to concentrate or sleep.

Your doctor will refer you for a hearing test. You should also have your ears checked to see if wax or an infection is causing the tinnitus. You may need another test, called a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan, to see if something in your ear or brain is causing the problem (for example, an acoustic neuroma).
What treatments work?

There are no treatments that are proven to get rid of tinnitus altogether. But there are lots of things you can try to improve it, so that it does not take over your life. Many people find their tinnitus bothers them less once they know it is not caused by anything dangerous.

You may be offered cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation, or biofeedback to help you cope with tinnitus. These therapies help you to adjust to tinnitus and worry about it less.

A hearing aid may help if you have hearing loss. You can also try a masking device, to make the tinnitus sounds less intrusive. This can be helpful if tinnitus is making it hard to get to sleep or to work. You can get masking machines that are small and worn near the ear, like a hearing aid. Some people find it helpful to play quiet background music.

Antidepressant medicines can be helpful if you have depression or anxiety as well as tinnitus. But they have side effects and they may not work if you do not have depression or anxiety.

What will happen to me?

Most people learn to manage their tinnitus well, and you may find it gets less intrusive and troublesome over time. Your doctor will make sure it is not being caused by a serious problem.

You may need to try a few options before you find a way of dealing with tinnitus that works for you.