

Tinnitus



This information has been compiled by the Audiology Department, Northern Health and Social Care Trust to assist you with the management of your tinnitus.

We encourage you to read this leaflet and try the ideas proposed. Tinnitus is a condition which relies on self-management and tinnitus symptoms can be significantly reduced given appropriate advice and support. Everyone is different so it is recommended that you try a number of techniques to find out what works best for you. It is also essential that you try each approach for at least 3 weeks before deciding if it is helping you.

If you have tried the following proposals for a period of time, we would suggest at least 4 months, and your symptoms have not eased or you feel your tinnitus is becoming more bothersome please contact us so we can offer further support and advice.

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WHAT IS TINNITUS?

Almost everyone experiences tinnitus at some point in their life. It is the perception of sound in the ears, or even within the head, when there is no external sound source. It can be described as a hissing, ringing or buzzing sound and often there is a musical quality to it. Some people “hear “a combination of sounds which may frequently vary in loudness.

Often tinnitus is a temporary condition, for example after exposure to loud sounds e.g.music concerts, sports matches etc.

It is estimated that between 10 and 14 % of the population experience long standing tinnitus.

WHAT CAUSES TINNITUS?

Tinnitus can be linked to a number of causes, e.g. hearing loss, certain conditions which affect the ears and balance system, some medications, even wax etc. In many cases, there is no apparent cause. Often the condition diminishes over time.

Our bodies produce tiny electrical impulses during everyday activities this is normal. Our brains are well equipped to be able to sort these irrelevant sounds from the sounds we need to hear. The brain “filters” out these impulses so we are not aware of them. In some cases our filtering network interprets these signals incorrectly and it is then that we can become aware of tinnitus.

HABITUATION –

Many people find that over time their tinnitus reduces. In this case, the brain learns to “ignore” the tinnitus. This is called “ habituation “ It is similar to how we are very aware of loud ticking clocks if we are not used to them. Yet over time, if we are exposed to this sound on a daily basis, we become unaware of it. It is not that the ear cannot hear the clock; it just means the brain has learned to ignore it.

STRESS AND TINNITUS -

It is widely accepted that stress can have a detrimental effect on how we cope with tinnitus. It is true that tinnitus itself can, in some people cause stress. Stress causes the brain to be

more acutely attuned to sounds which we believe to be troublesome. This in turn makes tinnitus appear louder. It is therefore important to try to break the stress/tinnitus cycle.

TINNITUS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES –

Most people find that over time, with the correct coping strategies, their tinnitus can reduce to a manageable level. Many find that they habituate to their tinnitus to an extent that they no longer notice it.

Some proven methods which we encourage you to try:

Hearing Aids: If hearing loss is an issue, this needs to be addressed. Hearing aids will increase the external sounds in keeping with the degree of hearing loss. Improving your hearing means that sounds which you would normally be unable to hear will become audible again. It takes perseverance to establish the use of hearing aids and you may need to return to the audiologist for adjustments. Once you are accustomed to wearing your hearing aids you may then be less aware of your tinnitus.

Breathing exercises: As well as reducing stress, breathing exercises give the mind something other than tinnitus to focus on and can often alleviate symptoms. These can be used during the day and can also be used at night time to help establish a good sleeping pattern.

Behavioural Techniques: These can be very useful in treating tinnitus. Many of us use these techniques daily without being aware of it. These are based on the fact that our minds affect the way we behave. The main objective is to alter the way we think and therefore this can have a positive effect on the way we deal with situations. It is training the brain to “choose” a different coping mechanism from the one which we have become used to. e.g., when used in Tinnitus Management, this could change the way we feel about tinnitus. Instead of believing that there is no cure and therefore little hope, we can explore different approaches e.g. reducing stress, hearing aids, breathing techniques etc. and that we can, over time find a method which will be most beneficial to you.

Sound enrichment: Tinnitus is often more noticeable in quiet environments. The purpose of sound enrichment is to introduce other sounds into the environment which will help “distract” the brain from the tinnitus sound. This may be as simple as keeping a radio/ television/ fan etc. on in the background. There are several apps which can be downloaded onto smart phones. These apps allow you to listen to sounds such as birds chirping, water flowing etc. These help to relax you and take your mind off your tinnitus. Just go into your app store on your smart phone or tablet and search for Tinnitus or sound enrichment. Most of these apps can be downloaded free of charge. It is important when introducing other

sounds that the objective is to distract your brain from the tinnitus, as opposed to “drowning it out “as otherwise your brain will not learn to habituate.

Diet and lifestyle: Maintaining a good diet has been found to be very important in the management of Tinnitus. Many foods can affect tinnitus and it is important to understand which foods to reduce in order to help ease symptoms. Of course this varies from person to person. A food diary may be a helpful tool to help you identify any trigger foods. Generally speaking a balanced diet enhances general health and well being and any foods which have the potential to affect health negatively may also cause tinnitus to become worse.

Research suggests that foods which may make tinnitus worse include: Salt (and flavour enhancers including MSG), Caffeine, Alcohol, Cigarettes, and Sugar (and sugar substitutes e.g. Aspartame)

Sleep problems: Many people find that one of the most difficult problems in their experience with tinnitus is difficulty getting to sleep.

Often we can assist sleep by:

- Cutting down/ cutting out caffeine in the evenings
- Avoiding catnaps throughout the day
- Keep active during the day as much as possible
- Trying to unwind for an hour or two before bedtime
- Try not to “fear “going to bed as anxiety over bedtime will make things worse.
- Go to bed when feeling sleepy; not just at a “set “time.
- Reducing use of laptops/ smart phones etc. for at least an hour before bedtime
- Try relaxation/ breathing exercise during the day. Also can be used in bed.
- If all else fails, get up, try a gentle activity such as reading a magazine and go back to bed when feeling tired again.

Hobbies and interests: Many people have found that starting a new sport or hobby has been immensely helpful. When we get engrossed in a new activity, naturally the mind will focus on the activity or the task rather than the tinnitus. This can be a good starting point on the road to Tinnitus Management.

REMEMBER -

- You are not alone
- Many people experience tinnitus
- Help and Support is available

Useful websites:

NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/conditions/tinnitus

British Tinnitus Association (BTA) www.tinnitus.org.uk

Action on Hearing loss www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Hearing Link www.hearinglink.org.uk

Our Vision

To deliver excellent integrated services in partnership with our community

If you would like to give feedback on any of our services please contact:
Email: user.feedback@northerntrust.hscni.net
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Our Values

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