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Living with tinnitus: symptoms and solutions

1 in 7 UK adults are affected by tinnitus, a condition where you hear ringing, buzzing, or other noises in your ears. Not only can this be irritating, it can affect many aspects of your daily life such as sleep, concentration, and even your mental health.

A report for Tinnitus Awareness Week 2023 found that 35% of people with tinnitus believe it was caused by exposure to loud noise – but few protect their ears¹.

Tinnitus symptoms

Tinnitus sounds are created inside your body, not from the outside. This is why many people first notice or experience the most difficulty with tinnitus at night or in quiet places. Sounds commonly associated with tinnitus include buzzing, hissing, pulsing and ringing.

If you have [tinnitus](#), it's less about the sounds you hear and more about why you hear them. Tinnitus can vary in severity and how it affects your life – for example, you may struggle to hear, concentrate, or sleep. These are everyday things most people take for granted.

Tinnitus symptoms can be constant or come and go, varying in loudness and the type of sound you hear. You may hear sounds in one or both ears, but sometimes it's difficult to pinpoint where it comes from. Also, you may be more sensitive to everyday noises and can find them painful – like the sound from a TV or a phone ringing, even when set to the appropriate volume.

Although tinnitus is most commonly a symptom of age-related hearing loss, it can occur for various reasons, including:

- Inner ear damage due to exposure to loud noises.
- A build-up of ear wax.
- [Ear infection](#).
- [Meniere's disease](#) - a condition that causes hearing loss and vertigo.
- [Otosclerosis](#) - a condition in which abnormal middle ear bone growth causes hearing loss.

Tinnitus treatment

Doctors diagnose tinnitus based on your symptoms, as there's no definitive test to identify it. Usually, you will have a [hearing test](#) to see if you have hearing loss and, if so, what type. If you don't have hearing loss, your doctor may organise additional hearing tests to try and find any underlying causes for tinnitus.

There's no cure for tinnitus or a treatment that works for everyone. Tinnitus can occur for several reasons and if an underlying condition is causing it, doctors will look to treat that.

For example, if a wax build-up is causing your tinnitus symptoms, doctors will remove the wax. If an underlying condition isn't the cause, the focus will be on managing the symptoms and offering advice for living with tinnitus.

Treating hearing loss

Tinnitus noises are inside your body, and hearing loss reduces the volume of external sounds. Hearing aids boost everyday sounds you may not usually hear, helping to make tinnitus noises less apparent and dominant. So, if you have any signs of hearing loss, even if it's minor, hearing aids can help you live with tinnitus.

Sleeping

Tinnitus is a condition that affects you all the time but it's most noticeable when it's quiet. This is why many people with tinnitus struggle to get to sleep². Playing music or relaxing sounds – such as rain, whale noises, and ocean waves – is a good way to mask tinnitus sounds and help you get to sleep.

Several products – such as pillows with built-in speakers and headbands with earphones – can help people with tinnitus, [insomnia](#), and other sleep issues. Products like this can help you benefit from sounds, music, and radio without disturbing others. However, listening at a safe volume is crucial so you don't damage your hearing.

Masking tinnitus sounds

In noisier locations and situations, masking tinnitus sounds can make them less apparent. Tinnitus masking devices create low level noise to drown out tinnitus symptoms. It's important to find the right balance as sounds need to be loud enough to mask tinnitus without damaging your ears.

Sounds like music, white noise, ambient sounds, and nature are common choices – but everyone is different. It may take some time to find the device that works best for you.

Look for hearing experts in your area, as companies that provide hearing aids sometimes offer other services, such as tinnitus consultations. This helps you better understand your needs and ways to manage tinnitus.

Tinnitus-related mental health

Living with tinnitus can cause [anxiety](#), stress, and [depression](#)– even more so if you aren't getting enough sleep. As there isn't a cure for tinnitus, managing its effects on your mental health is essential.

Therapy can help you understand more about tinnitus and why it may be contributing to some of your issues. Accepting tinnitus as part of your life can be difficult, but therapy offers support and teaches you techniques to deal with it.

[CBT](#) (cognitive behavioural therapy)⁴ is one method. CBT uses relaxation and stress management techniques to change how you think and feel about tinnitus. While you can't cure it, you can change the way it affects you mentally and regain a sense of control.

Also, support groups⁵ may help as you can speak to others who share your struggles and establish a support network to improve your quality of life.

If you're struggling with anxiety, [managing your stress](#), or are feeling depressed, you should contact your doctor for advice.

Further reading

1. [Tinnitus UK: A lot to lose: noise exposure and tinnitus.](#)
2. [DPAG: A role of sleep in tinnitus identified for the first time](#)
3. [Krog et al: The association between tinnitus and mental health in a general population sample](#)
4. [Jun et al: Cognitive behavioral therapy for tinnitus: evidence and efficacy](#)
5. [Tinnitus UK: Find support in your area](#)

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Authored by:	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCGP	
Originally Published: 24/02/2024	Next review date: 13/02/2024	Document ID: doc_32291

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