



Tinnitus Fact Sheet OHSU Tinnitus Clinic

What is Tinnitus?

Tinnitus, often described as a ringing or buzzing sound in the ear, is a symptom that can be related to almost every known hearing problem. Tinnitus is not a disease, but it can be caused by exposure to loud sounds, middle or inner ear infections, tumors on the hearing nerve, and even wax on the eardrum. Sometimes tinnitus can be medically or surgically treated. It is not always possible for your physician to determine the cause of your tinnitus; each case is different. The same cause will not necessarily produce the same set of symptoms in each patient. It is not always possible for your physician to determine the cause of your tinnitus; each case is different. The same cause will not necessarily produce the same set of symptoms in each student.

Tinnitus and Hearing Loss

Does Cutting the Hearing Nerve Cure Tinnitus? Unfortunately, cutting the nerve does not relieve tinnitus often enough to recommend it as a treatment. It does, however, produce total deafness in the operated ear, may cause balance problems, and in some cases, can make the tinnitus worse.

Will Tinnitus Cause Me to Lose My Hearing? No, but tinnitus may be worse with a loss of hearing. Ninety percent of patients with severe tinnitus also experience some hearing loss, usually in the high frequencies, which may be produced by exposure to loud sounds. The accompanying symptom is usually a high-pitched noise, often called "ringing tinnitus." Tinnitus patients should do everything possible to protect their hearing. (See Things to Avoid.)

Is Tinnitus Interfering with My Hearing? No, tinnitus does not interfere with hearing, although it may affect your attention span. On the other hand, tinnitus will seem worse if your hearing loss increases because outside sounds will no longer cover up the tinnitus.

Dealing with Tinnitus

Although psychological or emotional problems may be associated with tinnitus, it is a real problem—not imagined. Almost all patients indicate that stress or tension makes their tinnitus worse. Tinnitus is difficult to describe because there is no standard terminology related to it. Family and friends have trouble understanding the problems tinnitus patients face because they cannot see or hear it themselves. Because tinnitus is so hard to describe and treat, patients may fall victim to self-pity and depression. Some tinnitus patients withdraw from social interactions and alienate family members and coworkers—the very people who can help them cope with their problems.

Relieving Tinnitus

There are, as yet, no cures for tinnitus but there are several treatments currently used to produce relief. One treatment is the use of Acoustic Therapy, which is available in several forms. Another relief procedure involves medications to help patients to control their anxiety, depression, or insomnia. Research for relief procedures continues, and hope is very much alive.

Acoustic Therapy

Acoustic Therapy is one category of treatment used at the OHSU Clinic. It is the addition or enhancement of external sounds that can reduce the perception of tinnitus. Acoustic Therapy is available in several forms including sound generators that are worn in the ears; hearing aids; tapes, CDs, and

bedside units that can help with sleep or concentration; pillow embedded with small speakers that can plug into any tape, CD, or sound generation machine.

Hearing Aids

For some of our patients with hearing loss, a hearing aid alone will provide relief from tinnitus. Hearing aids amplify environmental sounds that can make tinnitus less noticeable.

Tinnitus Instruments

A tinnitus instrument is a combination of a hearing aid + a sounds generator. These units often provide relief for patients with a hearing loss and tinnitus.

Other Treatments

In addition to acoustic therapy, several other categories of treatments have been successful for tinnitus patients. These include:

- Medical Intervention
- Changes in diet, medications, or physical activity
- Medications to improve sleep or to reduce anxiety/depression
- Psychological counseling, relaxation therapy, stress reduction
- Massage, physical therapy, cranial or spinal adjustments

It is possible to provide relief of tinnitus to a number of patients so that the plight of the patient with severe tinnitus is not as bleak as it once was. Continued research will undoubtedly provide new and better treatment procedures for the future.

Finding the Best Treatment Method

It takes time to find the correct method of treatment and to properly fit and adjust hearing or tinnitus instruments. The first fitting is seldom the final one. Please remember that most treatments only provide relief, not a cure.

Understanding the Symptoms

The faucet test can help you understand more about your tinnitus. Open a water faucet to full force. Can you hear your tinnitus? The sound of running water contains many different tones or frequencies. If it reduces the loudness of your tinnitus, sounds like this will probably provide you with some relief. Tuning a radio to “between stations” so that only the static can be heard is a similar test. If the static reduces the loudness of your tinnitus, masking may be a good treatment for you. Note that radios with digital tuning will suppress the static and therefore do not work for this test.

Things to Avoid

- All Loud Sounds – You should wear earmuffs or earplugs when using chain saws, guns, lawn mowers, loud music or power tools. Exposure to loud sounds can make tinnitus worse and can also cause additional hearing loss.
- Caffeine – Caffeine strongly affects the loudness of tinnitus for some patients. It is a good idea to eliminate products such as: coffee, tea, soft drinks, and chocolate from your diet for one month to see what effect it has on you.
- Aspirin – High doses can produce tinnitus or make tinnitus worse
- Excessive use of alcohol – Intoxication can make tinnitus worse, especially during a hangover