

Tinnitus

Your questions answered

Patient Information

Audiology Service



7976



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What is Tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the sensation of hearing a sound, with no external sound present. At least 30% of the UK population experiences tinnitus at some point in their life. Tinnitus is not an illness.

What does Tinnitus sound like?

Tinnitus is very individual and can sound like many different things. People report noises including ringing, whistling, humming, buzzing, whooshing and other sounds. It is not unusual for someone to say they can hear more than one tinnitus sound. For some people tinnitus is intermittent, but others find it is constant. Tinnitus is often heard inside the head or ears, but sometimes it is only noticeable in one ear.

Are there other types of tinnitus?

Yes, there are different types of tinnitus that people report.

Some people hear tinnitus that is musical. They may hear familiar songs, instruments, choirs, or orchestras.

There is also a form of tinnitus known as pulsatile tinnitus, which has a rhythm and sound like a pulse or heartbeat.

Why do we notice tinnitus?

People can become aware of tinnitus for many reasons. These can include changes to hearing levels, ear problems, stress, ill health, head trauma, certain medical conditions and medications and noise exposure. Sometimes we do not know why a person has started to notice tinnitus.

Musical tinnitus can occur when the brain treats the tinnitus sounds as music to try and understand them. This can be more common in older people with a hearing loss, or those who have a strong liking for music.

Pulsatile tinnitus can occur when we become aware of changes in the blood-flow around our ears.

Why do these changes make us notice tinnitus?

Research is still going on into what happens to make us notice tinnitus, but we do know that the way we understand and react to sound changes at times. We normally have a filtering system between our ears and our brain that decides which sounds we need to listen to, and which ones are insignificant background sounds that can be blocked out. When we have changes in our hearing, due to hearing loss, infections or ear problems, the sound signals from our ears to our brain are not as clear as they once were. Our brain realises something is different and that we are not hearing as well. It tries to find the extra sounds it is missing, to fill the gap. The filtering system lets more sound through than it has done before, and we hear other body sounds that we would normally ignore. These body sounds are what we call "Tinnitus", and our brain can start to focus on them.

Stress and ill health also change the way we listen to sounds. When we are stressed or unwell, we are more vulnerable than usual. Our brain wants to make sure we will not be attacked by anything while we are not as secure as normal. Messages are sent from our brain telling us to pass more sound through the filtering system to check there is no danger around us. This means we can hear more body sounds (Tinnitus) and our brain can begin to focus on them.

When our brain detects these new sounds (Tinnitus), it can sometimes feel unsure about them. This can make it focus on the Tinnitus more and more, and when it does this the tinnitus seems to become louder.

Who should you see about tinnitus?

Your referral for Tinnitus Assessment is sent to either the ENT Department if you have any ear problems or balance problems, or directly to the Audiology Department if the main problems are your tinnitus or hearing.

How does the Audiology Department assess tinnitus?

To help you manage your tinnitus most effectively, we will complete:

- Otoscopy – The audiologist will shine a light into your ears to check your outer ear canal to make sure you do not have wax, an infection, or any ear conditions that they need to know about.
- Pure Tone Audiogram – This is a hearing test to check the quietest sounds you can hear in a range of important speech frequencies. The results of the hearing test show the audiologist the levels of your hearing and if you have a hearing loss.

We will ask you to complete:

- Tinnitus Handicap Inventory Questionnaire – This questionnaire gives the audiologist an indication of how much your tinnitus is affecting you, and your quality of life. It helps the audiologist to give you the right information about your tinnitus and how to manage it.

We may also ask you to have:

- MRI scan/ CT scan – People with unilateral, pulsatile, or distressing tinnitus are routinely sent for a scan appointment to check there are no rare underlying conditions or abnormalities.

What are the best ways to manage tinnitus?

Everybody who attends the Tinnitus Clinic is treated individually, depending on their case history, and their needs. The Audiologist will provide you with information to guide you on managing your tinnitus, and will discuss options with you, to allow you to make a decision about how to manage your tinnitus. The main ways of tackling tinnitus are:

- Knowledge – When someone understands tinnitus, it usually reduces the amount of worry, frustration, or anxiety they feel about it. This can help them to focus on other things instead and makes the tinnitus less intrusive for them. The Tinnitus Clinic Audiologists will provide a detailed explanation of what we know about tinnitus, to help you gain a better understanding of your tinnitus.
- Hearing aids – If you have a hearing loss and tinnitus, a hearing aid fitting may help to reduce the intensity of your tinnitus and allow you to hear better. Having hearing aids will reduce the strain on your hearing system, and let it be more selective about what it listens to again. This means that your brain can focus on the important sound such as speech and learn to treat the tinnitus as a background sound instead. It is important to use your hearing aids all day, so your brain can re-learn which sounds to focus on.
- White Noise Generators - If you do not have a hearing loss, there are other devices known as White Noise Generators that you can be fitted with instead. The White Noise Generators look like a hearing aid and use a constant white noise that you can listen to instead of your tinnitus. They help your brain to realise which sounds are important, and which sounds it can put into the background. So, your brain begins to listen to speech, and ignore your tinnitus.
- Sound Enrichment – when we listen to other sounds our brain focuses on them, and makes the tinnitus seem less noticeable. There are many forms of sounds that people can use to help, and it is important to find sounds you are comfortable with. There are devices, CDs and mobile device apps that can all provide sounds to listen to. The radio, TV and music can also be helpful.
- Relaxation – When we are relaxed our brain feels less worried about tinnitus and realises the tinnitus sound will not hurt us. Although it can be difficult to relax, it is important to think of techniques that make you feel calm, or things you enjoy doing. Some people find exercise or doing things they enjoy, such as reading, listening to music or watching a film help them to reduce the focus on their tinnitus. Breathing exercises and visualisation techniques can also be helpful. We can give you more information about these during your appointments at the Tinnitus Clinic.
- Other forms of support – People who feel anxious, low or depressed about their tinnitus, or other stressful situations that may affect their tinnitus management can find Cognitive- Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helpful. The audiologists can give you a leaflet about CBT, and details of how you can refer yourself to local services that offer CBT.

What is Habituation?

Most people who have tinnitus find, after time, that the tinnitus does not affect their daily lives. Their brains have realised that tinnitus is not an important noise, and they do not react to, or focus on the sound anymore. This process is known as habituation. It can take a different amount of time to go through the habituation process for each person.

Please use this space to write notes or reminders.

Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends, and carers.

Contact Us

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Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the positives and negatives of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use, and store the information we hold about you, please see patient information leaflet, Ref. **Corp 006** How we use your information, this can be found on the Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website, see details on the front cover.

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille, and other languages upon request. For more information, please ask in the department/ward.

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