

Help! My Ears are Ringing

By: Dr. Mary Maddock, Au.D.

Tinnitus: Some people describe it as “ringing”, or “buzzing” or even “whistling” in the ears or head. Almost all of us have experienced tinnitus temporarily – such as after a few hours at a noisy basketball game, or after a concert or any other occasion where our ears were subjected to noise. For others the tinnitus may be intermittent and there are many for whom the tinnitus is present 24 hours a day. Tinnitus is a sound that only you can hear. It is not generated from an external source but from within your head.

Recent data show there are 40 – 50 million Americans who experience some degree of tinnitus. Twelve million suffer from severe tinnitus. These individuals find their tinnitus to be disturbing and uncomfortable. The majority (83%) of tinnitus sufferers has some degree of hearing loss but seventeen percent have normal hearing.

Tinnitus is a common complaint among soldiers, musicians or those who use portable music players and baby boomers. In addition, one third of those over the age of 70 report significant tinnitus. Noise exposure is related to the presence of tinnitus as is hearing loss. However, other causes include diet, stress, head and neck trauma and some medications.

People who experience tinnitus may complain of insomnia, frustration or depression and annoyance or irritation that arises from the presence of the tinnitus. Sixty-three percent of tinnitus patients also suffer from hyperacusis or a hypersensitivity to external sounds.

Tinnitus is a symptom and is often regarded as a non-medical issue. However, there are a number of medically treatable clinical conditions that include tinnitus as a significant symptom. In these specific cases the treatment for the condition by a physician will likely reduce or possibly eliminate the tinnitus.

In all other cases, there is no cure for tinnitus. Treatments have included vitamins and or herbs, medication, surgical, psychological treatments, cognitive therapies and use of maskers. Where there is no specific medical treatment, the tinnitus sufferer has grasped for any help that could be found. Many times, the tinnitus sufferer is told to “get used to it”. The most promising therapies are based on discoveries made in the last five years. Independent researchers in the United States and in Europe have found that the area of the brain responsible for interpreting sound and producing fearful emotions are exceptionally active in people who report severe tinnitus.

The newer treatments include Tinnitus Retraining Therapy and most recently the Neuromonics Tinnitus Treatment method. The Neuromonics Tinnitus Treatment Method is non-invasive and easy to complete during regular daily activities. The method is only available from audiologists who have received special training. The device used in the Neuromonics Tinnitus Treatment Method is patented and is classified as a Class II medical device by the FDA. Clinical trials have taken place over the last 14 years and the

results of the last trial show that 91% of the subjects reported improvement of their tinnitus disturbance after 6 months.

The Neuromonics Tinnitus Treatment Method is designed to target neurological, audiological and psychological basis of tinnitus. The treatment starts with an extensive evaluation by a specially trained audiologist to determine candidacy for the Neuromonics Tinnitus Treatment program. The treatment occurs over approximately six months and includes two stages. After the initial evaluation the candidate is fit with a device that looks like an MP3 player called the Oasis™. The Oasis™ is worn for approximately two hours per day. The results of the evaluation are used to precisely design a stimulus that is programmed into the Oasis™. It delivers this customized stimulus that is combined with specific music. The therapy is designed to interact, interrupt and desensitize the tinnitus disturbance. The first stage of the treatment typically lasts 2 months while the second stage lasts about 4 months. Following these two stages the device can be used as needed for maintenance.

The American Tinnitus Association (www.ata.org) has provided many tips including the following to help manage your tinnitus.

1. Do Not Panic – tinnitus is usually not a sign of a serious, ongoing medical condition. Ask your family physician if your tinnitus is a symptom of a medically treatable condition.
2. See an audiologist or ear nose and throat physician who is interested in tinnitus treatments.
3. Review your current medications with your physician to find possible causes for your tinnitus. Do NOT stop taking any prescription medications without consulting your physician.
4. Be Wary of advice like “Live with It”
5. Keep up to date about tinnitus. There is more and more research available that is leading to more successful treatments
6. Examine how you live to find ways to eliminate or reduce stress or identify life style changes that may be contributing to your tinnitus.
7. Protect yourself from loud noises.
8. Continue seeking reliable information from area professionals, the American Tinnitus Association or other reliable sources.

This article was provided by Dr. Mary Maddock Au.D. of Wilmington Hearing Specialists, P.A.. Dr. Maddock is located at 3909-110 Wrightsville Ave in Wilmington. If you have questions about hearing, tinnitus or the various non-medical tinnitus treatments please call her office 791-4755 for an appointment.