

Tinnitus (ringing in the ears)

Tinnitus is hearing ringing or other noises in the ears when no outside source makes the sounds. Almost everyone gets “ringing in the ears” at one time or another. This may last a minute or so, but then goes away. When hearing these sounds persists, suspect tinnitus. The noises can range in volume from a ring to a roar.



SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Ringing, buzzing, hissing, humming, roaring, or whistling noises in the ears. These problems can persist or come and go.
- Problems sleeping
- Emotional distress
- Hearing loss

Tinnitus can be quite disturbing. It can interfere with normal activities.

CAUSES

- Exposure to loud noise which damages nerves in the inner ear. This can be from prolonged exposure or from one extreme incident.
- Hearing loss
- Ear disorders, such as labyrinthitis. This is swelling of canals in the ear that help maintain balance.
- Persistent allergies
- High blood pressure
- A reaction to some medications. These include: Aspirin, certain antibiotics, anti-cancer and anti-malaria drugs, and antidepressants.
- Ménière's disease. With this, dizziness, ringing sounds, and hearing loss occur together. Symptoms come and go.

TREATMENT

There is no cure for tinnitus. Treatment includes:

- A hearing aid for people who also have hearing loss. They amplify external noises to make tinnitus less noticeable.
- A sound generator that is worn behind the ear or as a tabletop or smartphone app. It makes a subtle noise to distract the person from tinnitus.
- Relaxation therapy
- Education and cognitive behavioral therapy to learn coping techniques and how to change your response to negative thoughts to reduce the impact of tinnitus
- Sound therapy to “retrain” the brain to stop noticing tinnitus sounds
- Sleeping pills, if needed



TRIAGE QUESTIONS



Did the tinnitus start after taking too much aspirin or other medicines with salicylates, and have any of these problems?

- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Confusion
- Rapid breathing

NO
↓

YES ► GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE



With ringing in the ears, do you have any of these problems?

- Severe pain in the ear(s)
- A foreign object is in the ear that cannot be removed.
- A recent ear or head injury
- You can't hear.

NO
↓

YES ► GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE



With ringing in the ears, do you have any of these problems?

- Feeling dizzy or like you are spinning
- Loss of balance or your walking is unsteady.
- Vomiting or nausea
- Drainage from the ear(s)
- Sleep habits and/or daily activities are disrupted

NO
↓

YES ► SEE DOCTOR



USE SELF-CARE



SELF-CARE / PREVENTION

- Wear earplugs or earmuffs when exposed to loud noises. This can prevent noise-induced tinnitus.
- Treat an ear infection right away.
- Use a white noise machine, smartphone app, and/or a wearable device to drown out the sounds.
- Use biofeedback or other relaxation techniques.
- Limit your intake of caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and aspirin.
- Get regular exercise. This promotes good blood circulation.
- Talk to your doctor if you use aspirin, levodopa, quinidine, propranolol, and/or quinine.
- If the noises started during or after traveling in an airplane, pinch your nostrils and blow through your nose. When you fly, chew gum or suck on hard candy to prevent ear popping. If possible, avoid flying when you have an upper respiratory or ear infection.