What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the sensation of hearing a sound when there is no external source for that sound. In a minority of cases, the sound may have a physical source within the body, like the sound of a person’s pulse, but in most cases, the sound is generated by the brain spontaneously.

Is tinnitus serious?

Tinnitus is very common – around one in eight or more precisely 13.2% of adults experience it. Fortunately, it is rarely an indication of a serious physical disorder. Very occasionally, tinnitus is a symptom of something that will need further medical investigation, so it is advisable to consult a GP.

Far more often, there is no physical problem or threat, but the experience of the
sound can be difficult to manage. For around one in ten people with tinnitus, there is a significant impact on their quality of life. This is where understanding and support from family and friends can make a big difference.

**What does tinnitus sound like?**

Everyone’s tinnitus is different. Many people hear a ringing sound, but others hear whistling, buzzing or crackling. There are many different experiences and, like fingerprints, there are endless variations.

The noise may be heard in one ear, in both ears or in the middle of the head or it may be difficult to pinpoint its exact location. The noise may be low, medium or high pitched. There may be a single noise, or two or more components. The noise may be continuous or it may come and go. It can be quiet or very loud, or the volume may fluctuate.

**How does it affect people?**

Tinnitus is sometimes a difficult condition to learn to live with and often causes anxiety. Anxiety, in turn, often makes the experience of tinnitus worse.

Many people with tinnitus feel isolated because there is just no adequate way to explain the struggle to come to terms with the constant or recurring presence of sounds that they can’t control.

Some people describe their condition as tiring or even exhausting. In the first months especially, people can feel they are fighting a constant battle.

You may notice changes in the person’s behaviours. Perhaps they have become short-tempered, withdrawn or distracted. Tinnitus can draw people inwards as their attention is constantly being diverted towards it. Their concentration is affected and this can mean that everyday tasks take longer than usual to complete.

It is very natural for people to have fears about living with tinnitus. Although most people do habituate to tinnitus over time – meaning that their brain learns to process the noise as background noise so that it seems less intrusive – it can be difficult to imagine getting to that point.

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How can I help?

Your friend, relative or partner will benefit from your patience and understanding as they adjust. Just being aware that what they are going through may be causing them problems is a huge help. Ask them if there are practical things you can do to help. For example, some people find loud or echoey environments very difficult, but don’t want to always be the person in a group to suggest a different meeting place or activity. Other people find quiet environments tricky where there is more focus on the sound of their tinnitus. Your support in backing up whatever option makes things easier for them can be a big relief.

People may search for patterns in their tinnitus, looking for aspects of their lifestyle which make it better or worse. If a healthy change can be identified (eg getting a good night’s sleep), this isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but you can help the person to assess whether they are letting their tinnitus control them. Try to do this by encouraging them to take an open-minded look at their own behaviour, and to come to their own conclusion, rather than by pushing your own point of view. Questions they might want to ask are:

- Have I begun to avoid things I previously enjoyed?
- Has this avoidance increased my frustration and anxiety about tinnitus?
- Are there healthier changes I can make to my lifestyle?

Try to support them to make a balanced decision about any lifestyle changes, rather than one based on their fears and worries, but do accept their decisions once they have decided to give something a go.

You can also encourage an open minded approach to different coping techniques, and try to be open minded yourself. For example, if night times are difficult, it can be extremely helpful for a partner to be open to the person trying a bedside sound generator. If you are a friend of the person, perhaps you could join them in wearing ear plugs for a night out, not only protecting your own hearing but helping them not to feel like the odd one out.

Another helpful thing to do is to encourage the person to get a proper diagnosis from their GP, if they haven’t yet done so, or to encourage them to go back to see their clinician if their tinnitus changes significantly. Likewise, encouraging a positive

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approach to recommended treatments is important. For example, if the tinnitus is accompanied by a hearing loss and a hearing aid is recommended, your support can go a long way to help the person take the plunge to try one and to persevere with the initial adjustment process.

**Look after yourself and your relationship**

You will be in the best state to support your friend, partner or family member when you are well yourself. Make sure you are making time for yourself and your own interests from week to week, and take care to eat and rest well.

For partners, it’s important to recognise, without blame, that your own well-being can be influenced by your partner’s experiences of tinnitus, and to talk openly about how to manage this. For example, just as you can be patient with your partner’s fears or anxieties, they can be patient with you if your own frustrations surface. You may find it helpful to set some ground rules about the way you discuss and approach issues to do with tinnitus. If tensions become difficult to manage, consider seeing a counsellor together. Many couples find this a helpful support through difficult times.

**Further support**

You may also want to help the person to access other forms of information and support. For example, you can check for relevant information from the BTA or look for a support group in your area at tinnitus.org.uk. Often, attending a support group can be as helpful for a partner or family member as it can for the person with tinnitus, offering a chance to talk things through with people who understand what you’re going through. There are around 70 independent tinnitus support groups around the UK and most share their details via the BTA website and in our *Quiet* magazine.

You may find it helpful to call our confidential freephone helpline on **0800 018 0527**.

**Alternative formats**

This publication is available in standard print on request.

**For further information**

Our helpline staff can answer your questions on any tinnitus related topics on **0800**

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018 0527 [Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm]. You may also find our website www.tinnitus.org.uk helpful. We also offer a free tinnitus management e-learning programme at www.takeontinnitus.co.uk.

**BTA publications**

Our information leaflets are written by leading tinnitus professionals and provide accurate, reliable and authoritative information which is updated regularly. Please contact us if you would like to receive a copy of any of our information leaflets listed below, or they can be downloaded from our website.

*available in Easy Read

- All about tinnitus*
- Complementary therapy for tinnitus: an opinion
- Drugs and tinnitus
- Ear wax removal and tinnitus
- Flying and the ear
- Food, drink and tinnitus
- Hearing aids and tinnitus*
- Hyperacusis
- Ideas for relaxation without sound
- Information for musicians
- Mindfulness for tinnitus
- Musical hallucination (musical tinnitus)
- Noise and the ear
- Otosclerosis
- Pulsatile tinnitus
- Relaxation
- Self help for tinnitus*
- Sound therapy
- Sources of mutual support for tinnitus
- Supporting someone with tinnitus

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Taming tinnitus
Tinnitus: a parent’s guide
Tinnitus: a teacher’s guide
Tinnitus and disorders of the temporo-mandibular joint (TMJ) and neck
Tinnitus and sleep disturbance
Tinnitus and stress
Tinnitus services*

Leaflets for children:
Ellie, Leila and Jack have tinnitus (for under 8s)
Tinnitus (for 8-11 year olds)
Tinnitus (for 11-16 year olds)
Ellie, Leila and Jack have tinnitus activity book (for under 8s)
Tinnitus activity book (for 8-11 year olds)
Tinnitus activity book (for 11-16 year olds)

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