

Tinnitus

A short introductory guide for people who experience Tinnitus and would like to know a little bit more.....



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Introduction

This leaflet has been written for people who have Tinnitus by a person who has Tinnitus! As a Technical and Rehabilitation Officer who is also a qualified Tinnitus Advisor I am asked many times for advice from people who I see in my everyday working life. Using their experiences and some of my own I hope I can at least provide a little knowledge that may help to improve or understand the frustrations of Tinnitus. As you read this leaflet you will see I am a person with a sense of humour and this, I firmly believe, is an essential characteristic needed to overcome the effects of Tinnitus.....most of the time!

What is Tinnitus?

Famously known as ringing in the ears, or noises in the head with no external noise, or terms such as "that b****y infernal racket!" The noises are varied and can take on many forms such as ringing, whistling, whining, rumbling, whooshing, radio static, squealing, clicking, muffled voices, music, rushing water and many more. The sounds can vary in pitch from the highest squeak to the lowest rumble at the other end of the scale, and in volume from the tiniest sound, most common when it is very quiet, to that of a diesel engine and of course all extremes in-between.

People who experience a pulsing sound usually have pulsatile tinnitus caused by a blood vessel which can sometimes, but very rarely, be heard by other people if they find themselves close enough!

Tinnitus may be experienced in one or both ears and sometimes in the middle or top of the forehead.

As many as 80% of the population may at some time in their lives, have experienced Tinnitus. Fortunately for many people the experience is short lived and does not disrupt life greatly, but for a number of people tinnitus may become an issue and they need advice and some support until they are able to manage the effects of their tinnitus.

Tinnitus is often associated with a hearing loss, but that is not always the case, people with good hearing may also experience Tinnitus.

A very short history of some Tinnitus remedies.

Vincent van Gogh was said to have suffered from Tinnitus and some people believe that in an attempt to rid himself of the problem, he cut off part of his ear. A bit extreme but then when Tinnitus invades your head at its worse level, we may feel like resorting to the extreme! Ludwig van Beethoven was probably the most famous Tinnitus sufferer and there are many musicians from the 60s who attribute their Tinnitus to listening to loud music and performing live on stage.

In the past tinnitus was known as "bewitched ear" by the Egyptians, who poked frankincense into their ears with reeds. The Persians chanted to the water gods for relief, while the Romans are said to have poured a mixture of radish and cucumber juice with vinegar and honey into the ears. In the Middle Ages Welsh people were believed to use freshly baked bread finely crumbled in their ears! Nothing was recorded as a cure for tinnitus but there must have been a lot of sticky ears about!

Possible Causes of Tinnitus

Why do some people get Tinnitus? Most of the time there is no short answer, but fortunately it rarely signifies something as gruesome as people often think when they first experience Tinnitus. A routine visit to the GP who may refer on to an ENT department may very occasionally highlight something more serious.

Sometimes recent medication taken for other ailments may have had a side effect of Tinnitus. But for the vast majority of people Tinnitus is mystery. However, delving deep into ones inner self may reveal the clue to some sort of relief!

Tinnitus triggers may vary from person to person but stress is often a major culprit. Salt and other food additives such as caffeine, aspartame and monosodium glutamate may also be a trigger. Drugs such as aspirin taken in high doses, antibiotics and cancer treatments may cause Tinnitus but the Tinnitus will often stop as soon as the drugs have worn off.

Listening to loud music is a known cause of Tinnitus as well as noisy occupational hazards.

Possible prevention

Preventing Tinnitus maybe easier than the cure because we do know that working in not only a noisy environment but where there is also vibration from heavy machinery can cause a hearing loss that is often accompanied by Tinnitus. Using ear defenders may not look trendy, but neither do Hearing Aids! Night Clubs, Discos, Bowling Alleys, Dog Kennels, Airports, Factories, Textile Mills, Press Shops, Artillery Ranges, Orchestral Pits and many more noisy places are all the source for potential Tinnitus causes, and the ear-phones symbol poster has not been put up to decorate the walls but to provide the visitors and workers with a reminder to protect their own hearing, because nothing can restore the loss of hearing and rid us of the annoyance of Tinnitus!

Possible Treatments

Nearly 2 decades ago, when I first started working with people with a hearing loss the focus point of any Tinnitus Conference, Training Day or meeting was on a medical cure in the form of drug therapy and many thousands if not millions of pounds and hours of experiments have gone on and as yet there is still no cure in tablet form.

There are at present, in the later part of 2011, 13 drug trials (clinicaltrials.gov.uk) in progress. Today at any of the same events the focus point has turned away from drug therapy to other forms of support for Tinnitus patients.

If a drug is ever found to stop Tinnitus, wonderful! But for the time being it would be wiser to try and find an alternative way to combat the cause and effect of Tinnitus. Sometimes patients are prescribed antidepressants and for a few people these may be effective.

Alternative therapies include Herbal medicine such as Ginkgo Biloba or Bojungitang and Banhabaekchulchonmatang, Acupuncture, Homeopathy, Laser Therapy, Qigong, Aromatherapy, Hypnotherapy, Biofeedback and Hopi candles. All of these therapies have been tried and tested by Tinnitus patients with varying degrees of success or failure depending on your viewpoint. The general consensus among the medical profession is that to a point the only two therapies, Hypnotherapy and Qigong have been seen to be effective. But if you want to try an aromatherapy session and find it relaxing and helps to distress then that can only be good for a tinnitus patient. If a session with a homeopathic therapist identifies the source of stress, this may in turn prove helpful in recognising what has caused the Tinnitus for that patient. As a Home Fire Safety Advisor (another string to my bow) I have to give a strong word of warning when it comes to the Hopi Candles. Sticking a lighted wax taper in your ear is probably a good way to singe your hair and eyebrows but there is no proof that they cure Tinnitus or that they were indeed invented by members of the Hopi Tribe!

So What Does Work

Tinnitus Retraining Therapy (TRT) aims to help patients through education, relaxation and sound therapy usually provided by a Hearing Therapist.

Identifying the cause is an important step along the road to acceptance and understanding Tinnitus and to breaking down the **Agitator -Stress -Tinnitus** cycle. Thinking about when the Tinnitus started and what else caused you stress about that time? What can you do to reduce the amount of stress or alleviate the situation? It's not always an easy solution to find and solve but it's often the first step to learning how to progress with Tinnitus.

Finding time for stress relief may mean changing life time habits or finding time for new hobbies or interests. Keeping active and busy certainly helps take your mind off the noise. An active lifestyle is not only healthy but it can certainly benefit a healthy mind, walking, dancing, swimming, yoga or a new sport as well as group activities such as an art & craft group, Bridge Club or Bingo!, Evening classes etc can all be beneficial, its up to you to open your mind to new ideas. Tinnitus doesn't have to mean loss of quality of life - it isn't an illness and it certainly won't go away if you lay down in a darkened room! Think of it as an opportunity to broaden your horizons!

There are a number of noisy items designed to help people with Tinnitus relax, these make various noises such as a tumbling waterfall, rain, the sea, bird song etc, and for many people they have been successful.

Pillow speakers designed to plug into a radio or music player at night time when the Tinnitus is at its worst help to focus the mind on a different noise.

White noise generators which look like a hearing aid but issue a white noise were once issued by Hearing Therapists but are less popular now.

Special CDs have been created for Tinnitus patients to listen to in a bid to help lessen the effects of Tinnitus.

However as a person who has lost the ability to hear anything I am at a loss to know why anyone would want to listen to anything that has been created to generate a white noise when there is so much wonderful music, varied to suit every taste and so readily available, as well as radio and audio books etc. surely it is better to "use the music in case you lose the music".

When I could hear a bit I noticed my own tinnitus would be much more bearable when I got hooked on an audio book! James Bond once did the trick for me splendidly!

I have known people who say red wine was the culprit and others who said a pint relaxed them and drowned out the Tinnitus.

Finding the Off Switch.

In the words of the British Tinnitus Association's enigmatic ambassador and DJ Eddy Temple-Morris, finding the off switch is the single most important factor for winning the battle with Tinnitus. At first you fumble around in the dark looking for this switch, but after a few hard tries you find it and flick it off. Sometimes it take a few flicks but once you have the idea you can turn your mind off from the noise and get on with life. Staying up beat and using your own power of positive thinking is very important for people with a hearing loss... this also applies for people with Tinnitus.

You rule the Tinnitus don't let it rule you!!

Resources in North Wales

At present a referral to the local ENT department by your GP can enable you to be seen by a Hearing Therapist who can outline the support available to you.

North Wales Tinnitus Support Group meets in St Asaph once a month and offers peer support in a friendly and informal group.

Nationally Organisations

The British Tinnitus Association. Ground Floor, Unit 5, Acorn Business Park, Woodseats Close, Sheffield. S8 0TB 0114 250 9922 0800 018 0527 (free helpline)

BTA publish Quiet a quarterly magazine for people with Tinnitus

Recommended reading

Living with Tinnitus and Hyperacusis, Dr Laurence McKenna, Dr David Baguley, Dr Don McFerran ISBN 978 1 84709 083 6

North Wales Deaf Associations aim is to improve the quality of life for Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people by the provision of appropriate facilities, services and resources. As a charity we rely on the generosity of people like you. Any donations you are able to make are warmly welcomed.