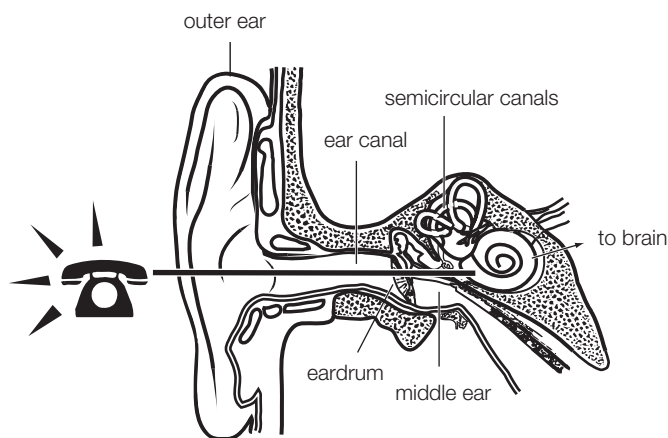


## What is tinnitus?

*Tinnitus* is hearing abnormal noise in the ear or head when there is no sound coming from the outside.

The word *tinnitus* comes from the Latin *tinnire*, which means 'to ring'.

Although it usually refers to ringing in the ear, tinnitus may include buzzing, roaring, whistling, hissing, humming or a combination of sounds.



## How common is tinnitus?

Although most of us experience tinnitus at some time, especially with a lot of wax blocking an ear, it is only a temporary problem. About 1 in 4 people are bothered by it, but it is a severe problem for 2% of the population.

## What causes or aggravates it?

- Ear disorders such as infection
- Excessive noise exposure for a long time
- Wear and tear of the ear with ageing
- Some prescribed drugs
- Stress and fatigue
- Excessive alcohol
- Heavy smoking
- Social drugs, including caffeine and marijuana
- Head injury
- Ménière's syndrome (fluid in the inner ear)

## How serious is tinnitus?

Tinnitus in itself is not a serious condition, does not cause pain or deafness but can be frustrating. Most people with tinnitus have a hearing loss, but there are also many people with normal hearing who have tinnitus. Many people with tinnitus worry that it is a symptom of a brain tumour, a stroke, a nervous disorder or some other serious head problem. However, this is rarely the case.

## What are its effects?

The main problem is the psychological effect, as the noise tends to affect one's concentration, ability to think and peace of mind. Stress can aggravate the problem.

It can also be a problem at night, when it is more noticeable and affects the ability to sleep.

## What can be done for tinnitus?

Tinnitus is less noticeable when there is background noise, and therefore it is important to 'switch off' from the ear ringing as much as possible and focus on other noise.

The following methods can help one cope with tinnitus.

### Stress management and relaxation techniques

Since tinnitus is more noticeable when you are stressed, tired or emotionally upset, learning relaxation or meditation techniques to focus your attention elsewhere may be helpful. Some patients are helped by hypnosis. Your doctor will advise on these methods.

### Background sound treatment

A useful treatment, especially for those having trouble getting to sleep, is to have background music playing when retiring at night. Other sounds that are sometimes used include FM static produced by a radio set off the station and environmental sound-masking tapes.

### Tinnitus maskers

Some people are helped by wearing a tinnitus masker, which is a device like a hearing aid worn behind the ear. It produces a type of hissing noise that tends to counter-balance the tinnitus noise.

### Hearing aids

If a hearing loss accompanies the tinnitus, the use of a hearing aid can mask the tinnitus with amplified sound. This makes it easier to focus on outside sound.

### Distracting activities

Some people can cope by diverting their attention away from their tinnitus by keeping themselves busy and undertaking interesting activities that focus their mind elsewhere. Examples include gardening, power walking, music, television, handicrafts, jigsaw puzzles, card playing and discussion groups.

### Counselling and support

Most cities have a counselling service for tinnitus sufferers. Ask your doctor about the Australian Tinnitus Association.