

Tinnitus Information



This information has been compiled by the audiology department in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. We encourage you to read this information as it forms the basis of your tinnitus management plan.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the perception of sound when there is no external source of sound. You may hear different types of sound like ringing, hissing or whooshing. One adult in eight may experience persistent tinnitus.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus is not a disease; it is a sensation arising from some type of mental or physical change in the body. Tinnitus is most common in people who have hearing loss or ear problems but it can also be found in people with normal hearing. Our ears feed auditory information to the hearing centre in our brain – the brain is then responsible for putting all of the information together and making sense of the sound. Our brain will automatically filter out any unnecessary activity like background sound. If there is a change in the system e.g. a hearing loss the amount

of information being sent to the brain changes and the brain responds by seeking out more information from our ears. This extra information is what is perceived as tinnitus. From years of research it is generally accepted that it is not only a change in the ear that can cause tinnitus but any other change in our body for example a change in stress levels or general wellbeing – some people may become aware of tinnitus after a stressful event and once aware of it can continue to notice it more and more.

Tinnitus can improve!

It can be worrying when tinnitus is first experienced – it is a new sensation and it takes time to adapt. Many people find the intrusiveness of tinnitus diminishes over time without doing anything in particular as the brain learns to ignore tinnitus – a process called habituation. This is like moving into a room with a noisy fan; the fan will initially seem very loud then after a while it will become much less noticeable. It is not that you can no longer hear the fan but that the brain has learned to ignore it.

Tinnitus management techniques

Understand the connection between our thoughts and tinnitus

The more you worry about tinnitus or fear its consequences, the more this exaggerates the apparent importance of tinnitus. Worrying about tinnitus has the effect of increasing the volume and the intrusiveness of the tinnitus this in turn can increase the distress it can cause. Remind yourself that the more you think and worry about tinnitus, the worse that will make it – instead of worrying that your tinnitus will never improve, remember that there are a number of things that people with tinnitus can learn to do to reduce the annoyance of tinnitus

Relaxation

Worrying about tinnitus has the effect of increasing the volume and intrusiveness of tinnitus – this in turn can increase the distress it can cause. Relaxation and breathing exercises can help to reduce anxiety and stress levels and in turn help you to notice your tinnitus less. Focusing your attention on your breathing while taking slow, deep

breaths allows you to focus on something other than your tinnitus and as a result of feeling more calm you may also feel more able to manage your tinnitus.

Use of hearing aids

If you have a hearing loss, using hearing aids is often extremely helpful. Hearing aids will increase your awareness of environmental sounds providing sound enrichment and will also address the effects of straining to hear which can cause increased awareness of tinnitus. It can take time to adapt to the use of hearing aids and consistent, full time use of any hearing aids prescribed is essential as part of a tinnitus management plan.

Use of sound enrichment

Tinnitus is likely to be more noticeable in a quiet environment – it is often helpful to add sound to the environment whenever it is quiet during the day and at night. Using sound enrichment can help to distract the brain from focusing on tinnitus. It is important to use a pleasant, unobtrusive background sound such as the radio or music played at a low level. It is also possible to use therapeutic sound like white or brown noise using an app downloaded on to your phone to create a sound enriched environment. Any sound should be used at a low level where tinnitus is still audible, it should not be used to mask out tinnitus but to allow it to be heard within an environment of sound.

Addressing sleep problems

Many people find tinnitus becomes more disturbing at bedtime or during the night when it can be very quiet. Using low level sound at bedtime and throughout the night is often helpful and it is often important to consider:

- Reducing caffeine intake in the afternoon/evening
- Using relaxation techniques to prepare the body for sleep
- Restricting the use of smartphones etc. an hour before bed
- Keeping as active as possible throughout the day

Useful Links

NHS Choices for further information

www.nhs.uk/conditions/tinnitus

British Tinnitus Association (BTA) for self help information

www.tinnitus.org.uk

<https://www.tinnitus.org.uk/takeontinnitus>

Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) for services including tinnitus information course, one to one support and self help information

<https://rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/tinnitus/>

Remember you are not alone and help and support is available.

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