



Tinnitus facts and statistics

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the perception of noises in the head and/or the ears which has no external source. It is not a disease or illness; it is a symptom generated within the auditory system. The noise may be in one or both ears, or in 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.

Who gets tinnitus?

Experiences of tinnitus are very common in all age groups, especially following exposure to loud noise. Tinnitus is known to be one of the most common health problems facing the UK today. Mild tinnitus is common - about 10% of the population have it all the time¹ and, approximately half of patients with tinnitus find it moderately or severely distressing. There is a widely held misconception that tinnitus is confined to the elderly, but various studies have shown that it can occur at any age, even in quite young children. People who are hard of hearing can also experience tinnitus.

What does tinnitus sound like?

The sound of tinnitus varies from one person to another. The noises are usually described as ringing, whistling, buzzing or humming, which can manifest themselves at a range of volumes from a low, ambient noise to a level that can seem overwhelming. Some people hear the noise as a low frequency; others find it either medium or high pitched. The noise may be continuous for some people and may come and go for others. Sample tinnitus noises are available from the BTA's website.

What causes tinnitus?

The causes of tinnitus are still not fully understood, but tinnitus is associated with:

- **Hearing loss** - the delicate hair cells in the inner ear may reduce in number due to 'wear and tear' as people age. This gradual change can cause hearing loss, which makes tinnitus more noticeable as it is not masked by external sound.
- **Exposure to loud noise** - hair cells can also be damaged by exposure to loud noise, which could generate tinnitus.
- **Stress and anxiety** - it is not always clear whether stress causes the onset of tinnitus. However, tinnitus may be more noticeable if you are anxious or stressed.

PRESS ENQUIRIES

Please contact Emily Broomhead or Nic Wray at the BTA office on 0114 250 9933
email emily@tinnitus.org.uk or nic@tinnitus.org.uk
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- **Ear infections** - middle ear infections can cause hearing loss and tinnitus. Symptoms will normally be temporary, but it is important to have the underlying infection treated by a GP.

Is there a cure for tinnitus?

At present there is no cure for tinnitus, but the BTA is dedicated to helping find one and therefore the charity funds and helps to advance clinical research that will benefit millions of people in the UK and worldwide. The BTA also provides information about self-help techniques that can be useful.

It does get better

Studies have indicated that, over time, the noises disappear completely or at least diminish to a tolerable threshold level in the majority of cases, as the brain loses interest and stops surveying the signal. This process is called 'habituation'. The length of time this takes varies from person to person - but it does happen.

What to do if you think you have tinnitus?

Tinnitus is rarely an indication of a serious disorder, but it is wise to see a GP if tinnitus is suspected. The GP may make a referral to an Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) or Audiology department.

¹ Medical Research Council figures, Davis & El Rafie, 2000. About 10% of adults (4.7 million people) have experienced tinnitus for longer than five minutes. This figure does not include people who have had tinnitus for a short time after being exposed to loud noise.

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