



## Tinnitus

Tinnitus is a subjective experience where one hears a sound when no external physical sound is present. Some call it “head noise,” “ear ringing,” or use similar terms to describe it. The word is of Latin origin and means “to tinkle or to ring like a bell.” It has 2 pronunciations, both correct: “ti-night-us” or “tin-ni-tus.”

*So what causes tinnitus?* There are many causes. In fact, almost everything that can go wrong with the ear has tinnitus as an associated symptom. Problems like overproduction of ear wax to ear infections to acoustic tumors can produce tinnitus. One of the most common causes of tinnitus is exposure to excessively loud sounds either on the job (musicians, carpenters, pilots) or recreationally (shooting, chain saws, loud music). Sometimes other disorders can cause tinnitus such as compression of cervical vertebrae in the neck or the temporomandibular (jaw) joint. Tinnitus can also be caused by cardiovascular disease, allergies, and underactive thyroid or degeneration of the bones of the middle ear. In most cases, tinnitus is associated with some hearing loss. It is also important to note that over 200 prescription and non-prescription drugs list tinnitus as a potential side effect.

A small percentage of tinnitus patients also experience a hypersensitivity to sound. This is called *hyperacusis*. This can be a difficult problem to manage, however, use of hearing protection can provide some relief. In addition, careful presentation of a low-level broad band noise which is gradually increased over time can make the ears less sensitive to environmental sounds.

*What makes tinnitus worse?*

1. **Loud Noise.** It is critical for tinnitus patients to avoid loud sounds and protect their ears at all costs.
2. **Excessive use of alcohol or recreational drugs** has been found to exacerbate tinnitus in some individuals.
3. **Caffeine** can also increase tinnitus.
4. **Nicotine.** The vascular effects of nicotine are associated with an increase in tinnitus.
5. **Aspirin** and some antibiotics (as well as many other drugs) are causative tinnitus agents and can make existing tinnitus worse.
6. **Stress.** Many people notice a reduction in the volume of their tinnitus when they are able to control their stress levels.

*What should a tinnitus patient do?* If you are experiencing tinnitus, you should be examined by an otolaryngologist (ENT) to determine if there is a medical condition causing the tinnitus. If this is not the case, you may wish to consider non-medical treatment options which your physician can discuss with you.