

# Putting Fears About Drugs and Aggravating Tinnitus into Perspective



By Stephen Nagler, MD

***Q: My doctor prescribed antidepressants to help me cope with my tinnitus, but I'm afraid to take them because they might cause my tinnitus to get louder. Is that a legitimate concern?***

A: It's important to make a distinction between drugs that have been reported to occasionally increase tinnitus loudness temporarily and drugs that can potentially cause permanent auditory damage. Hundreds upon hundreds of drugs have been reported at one time or another to temporarily increase tinnitus loudness, but that does not necessarily mean they cause permanent auditory damage.

For instance, the antimalarial drug chloroquine can potentially cause an exacerbation in tinnitus loudness and cause permanent auditory damage. On the other hand, whereas various antidepressants have been reported to occasionally exacerbate tinnitus, they normally do not cause auditory damage. Thus, if your doctor believes that you would benefit from taking an antidepressant, from an auditory standpoint, I see no harm in following your doctor's advice.

If the drug seems to aggravate your tinnitus, then you can always discontinue it under your doctor's supervision. If the tinnitus does not settle back down within a week or two of discontinuation, then the antidepressant was likely not the culprit in the first place. I would add that unless you are actually depressed, in most cases there are better ways to cope with tinnitus than taking antidepressants.

***Q: My doctor suggested that I stop taking Xanax® (alprazolam), but I'm afraid to because it helps me sleep and feel less bothered by my tinnitus. Is there some other medication that would help me sleep or feel less stressed? I'm overwhelmed by the thought of not having a prescription.***

A: The use of the benzodiazepine Xanax® has long been a hot-button topic in tinnitus circles. It would take an entire book chapter to adequately address this very complex subject. Indeed, there are extremely strong opinions on both sides of the issue. You make it a bit easier from a Q&A standpoint in that you are already taking the drug and, moreover, appear to be receiving considerable benefit.

That said, benzodiazepines should not be taken any longer than necessary. All things being equal (and they never are), you are in general better off not taking benzodiazepines than taking them. The challenge lies in the fact that your anxiety level is apt to increase considerably as you come off Xanax® because (1) the drug tends to be habit-forming, (2) the drug tamps down overall anxiety, and (3) the drug decreases tinnitus-associated distress *without effectively addressing the underlying cause of that distress.* (The importance of this third factor cannot be overstated.) Additionally, tapering the drug too rapidly can potentially result in an unpleasant temporary increase in tinnitus loudness.

My recommendation would be to thoroughly discuss the pros and cons of discontinuing Xanax® with your doctor (possibly show him or her this column), and if together you decide that it is time to begin tapering the drug, ask your doctor to recommend a plan for

doing so extremely gradually. I would also suggest that you investigate some nonpharmacological approaches for decreasing tinnitus-associated distress, such as *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* (CBT), so that your anxiety can become much more manageable as you taper Xanax® and thereafter.

**Q: Someone said that lipoflavonoid supplements can reduce the sound of tinnitus. Is it worth giving them a try?**

A: To the best of my knowledge, no large-scale reliable and verifiable properly controlled scientific studies show any benefit over placebo to taking lipoflavonoid supplements for the purpose of improving tinnitus by any generally accepted criteria. But that really wasn't your question. You basically want to know whether it is worth giving lipoflavonoid supplements a try anyway, and the decision to undertake any treatment for any condition is a highly personal one involving numerous factors, only

one of which is the presence of (or, in the case of lipoflavonoid supplements for tinnitus, the absence of) legitimate scientific studies attesting to the efficacy of that treatment.

The 18th-century French philosopher Voltaire once said, "The practice of medicine is the art of entertaining the patient while nature gets him better." I sincerely hope that in the year 2018 medicine has progressed far beyond the state of affairs of Voltaire's day, but that aside, I suspect that the placebo effect is not entirely without merit even today.

In other words, if lipoflavonoid supplements might help solely by virtue of their placebo effect, then one might wonder what's the harm? The short answer has to do with the fact that the supplement industry is not subject to the same level of U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) controls as the pharmaceutical industry – so as I see it, you have no real assurance that what's in the bottle is what's on the label. In fact, you have no real assurance that

what's in the bottle is not in some way harmful. And though it might be tempting to go ahead and take a chance anyway, I would strongly recommend that before doing so, you (and anybody else reading this column who is taking or is considering taking supplements of any kind for any purpose) purchase a terrific, highly informative, well-documented, and very inexpensive paperback by Paul A. Offit entitled *Do You Believe in Magic?* I read it, and the book changed my entire way of thinking on the subject. 



*Stephen Nagler, MD, is a licensed physician recently retired from his private practice, which was devoted to the evaluation and treatment of individuals with severe tinnitus and hyperacusis. He is a former chair of the*

*board of directors of the American Tinnitus Association. He lives in Atlanta, GA, and runs a Q&A tinnitus site at: [www.tinn.com](http://www.tinn.com).*



**"I really appreciate your time and concern."**

**— Janice T., sister of someone with tinnitus**