

Q and A: Strategies for Living with Tinnitus

Photo courtesy of Dr. Stephen Nagler, Briksdal Glacier, Norway

Q *I have had tinnitus for two months. I was evaluated by an ENT specialist, who said there is no cure. Does tinnitus ever go away on its own? I keep hoping mine will. I don't see how I can conduct my life otherwise.*

A Yes, sometimes tinnitus does go away on its own. There is no hard data, but it happens more frequently than you might imagine. It is more likely to occur within the first year or two, but even after a decade, tinnitus can spontaneously resolve for no apparent reason. In terms of how to conduct your life, there is really no “one size fits all” answer.

As I have come to see it, now that you have had tinnitus for several weeks and have been evaluated by an ENT, you have two choices from a purely practical standpoint: you can hope each and every day that you

will be one of the “lucky ones” and that at some point your tinnitus will vanish, or you can assume that you could hear your tinnitus for the rest of your life. With the first approach, each morning when you wake, you may well discover that you still have tinnitus, and you could, therefore, start out your day disappointed. With the second approach, your day starts out exactly as expected, and if one day you notice that your tinnitus is gone, then you can be absolutely thrilled to have been wrong in your initial assumption.

Early on in my own tinnitus odyssey, I decided that it made no sense at all for me to start out each day disappointed if I didn't absolutely have to because I knew it would not affect my tinnitus itself in the least. So, I personally chose the second approach. In my opinion, this is not a decision to be taken lightly. You are not reading this

column because you have tinnitus. You are reading this column because you have tinnitus, and it makes you feel bad. If your tinnitus did not in some way or other make you feel bad, then — while you would still have tinnitus — you really wouldn't have a problem. Moreover, if your tinnitus made you feel less bad, then — while you would still have tinnitus — you would have less of a problem. With daily disappointment, adopting the second approach can be very powerful indeed. Any strategies that serve to lessen the impact of tinnitus on your life — and there are many such strategies — are worthy of serious consideration. It's just that I honestly do not think that spending any appreciable amount of time hoping it will go away is one of them. Far better to assume it could never go away and be overjoyed if you discover one day that you have been wrong all along.

Q *What is the difference between habituation and learning to live with tinnitus?*

A When I think of learning to live with tinnitus, I think of developing effective strategies for coping with it or dealing with it. I think in particular of figuring out how to get through those “bad ear days.” Habituation is something entirely different.

Habituation is a process whereby you react to your tinnitus less and less over time — and, consequently, become less and less aware of it. With habituation, as with learning to live with it, your tinnitus is still

present every time you purposely seek it. But with habituation you just don’t care. And if, as a result, you go from being aware of your tinnitus 90 percent of the time to being aware of your tinnitus 10 percent of the time, in my opinion, that’s not learning to live with your tinnitus. Rather, that’s learning to live *without* your tinnitus.

Q *I have heard that the shingles vaccine contains neomycin, which is ototoxic. Is it safe for a person with tinnitus to take the vaccine?*

A Neomycin ototoxicity is dose-related. The amount of

neomycin in a shingles vaccine is on the order of 25 µg (or 0.025 mg), which is not even remotely enough to cause auditory damage. From a tinnitus standpoint, I consider the shingles vaccine to be completely safe. If it is at all reassuring to you, I myself took the vaccine without giving it a second thought. 

Stephen Nagler, MD, is a licensed physician whose practice is devoted to the evaluation and treatment of individuals with severe intrusive tinnitus and hyperacusis. He is a former chairman of the Board of Directors of the American Tinnitus Association. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and runs a Q & A tinnitus site at: www.tinn.com

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