

Naturopathic Approach Focuses on Prevention and Relies Less on Prescription Drugs



Naturopathic medicine is a distinct primary healthcare profession that emphasizes prevention and optimal health through therapeutic methods and substances that pose the least risk of side effects and encourage the natural healing process. For the naturopathic physician, the goal of patient care is to identify the underlying cause of an illness rather than suppress symptoms through medications. Practitioners draw on standard medicine and complementary approaches to tailor treatment to individual needs. To learn more about the field, the American Tinnitus Association interviewed Dr. Judy Gianni, a licensed naturopathic physician with more than 23 years of experience.

Joy Onozuka (JO): *What is a Naturopathic Medical Doctor (ND or NMD) and how does it differ from a Medical Doctor (MD)? What is the treatment philosophy?*

Dr. Judy Gianni (JG): Naturopathic physicians are trained in the art and science of natural healthcare at an accredited and specialized naturopathic medical college that has

four-year postgraduate training. Some states use the designation NMD, while other states use ND.

Currently, there are 20 states – plus Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands – that license naturopathic physicians, although the scope of practice varies from location to location.

Naturopathic doctors have their roots in traditional medicine from Europe and Eastern traditional treatments with the latest science. Naturopathic doctors strive to understand and treat the root cause(s) of illness, facilitating the body’s innate self-healing ability. Many naturopathic physicians practice a true “best of both worlds” approach, or integrative medicine that includes the best of traditional treatments and newer medications. They may suggest the use of dietary changes, removal of offending agents, as well as the use of herbs, nutraceuticals, homeopathy, acupuncture, and even physical modalities, such as craniosacral therapy, to stimulate healing.

JO: *How might naturopathic medicine help someone struggling with tinnitus?*

JG: As mentioned above, naturopathic physicians always endeavor to understand the root cause of any illness, and this does not change when treating patients suffering from tinnitus. One of the reasons why this condition – which affects between 7 and 10 percent of the population – is so tricky to treat is there are many possible causes, and each case can be quite unique.

Root causes can range from noise-induced hearing loss, otosclerosis (a hereditary condition caused by abnormal growth of bones in the ears), otitis (ear infection), impacted cerumen, Meniere’s disease (disease affecting the membranous labyrinth in the ear and causing progressive attacks of tinnitus and vertigo), multiple sclerosis, acoustic neuroma, and infections.

There also are many cases of tinnitus resulting from ototoxicity, which damages the ear, from a whole list of medications, including aspirin, NSAIDs (Nonsteroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs), certain antibiotics, loop diuretics, and chemotherapeutic agents (e.g. Cisplatin® and Vincristine®). There are certain vitamin and mineral

deficiencies associated with tinnitus that have to be looked at as well.

At times, there are structural issues that can trigger tinnitus, such as head injury, whiplash, TMJ (temporomandibular joint), and other dental disorders. But it's been reported that up to 40 percent of patients cannot identify the cause associated with the onset of their tinnitus. Naturopathic physicians have to be good medical detectives to identify as many of the possibilities of root causes and address each one, layer by layer.

JO: *Have you found a particular treatment protocol that's helpful in treating tinnitus patients?*

JG: Again, each case is treated uniquely. However, based on research findings, I've found several natural agents useful when treating a patient with tinnitus. The pine bark extract from *Pinus maritima*, pycnogenol, at 100 mg per day, can be beneficial in improving cochlear blood flow. One study showed that at six months, 87.3 percent of participants taking Pycnogenol® were asymptomatic compared with 34.6 percent of participants in the control group.¹ It's an excellent antioxidant, and no side effects were observed in the studies.

It appears some nutrient deficiencies can influence one's ability to develop tinnitus. One study found up to 31 percent of those suffering from tinnitus were deficient in zinc.² Whether that be causal or coincidence is hard to say, but I have found that some of my patients have responded to 50 mg of zinc a day on a full stomach. Additionally, B vitamins, specifically B₃ or nicotine acid

and B₁₂ methylcobalamin deficiencies have been shown to impact incidence of tinnitus.^{3,4}

Melatonin has shown some promise in the alleviation of tinnitus and, therefore, warrants further investigation. It is unknown whether its role as a sleep enhancement agent, its innate antioxidant properties, or some other mechanism is responsible for the reports of tinnitus reduction or relief.⁵

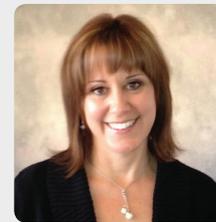
JO: *The American Academy of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery Foundation (AAO-HNSF) Clinical Practice Guideline: Tinnitus, which was issued in 2014, is explicit in saying that healthcare providers should not recommend supplements to treat tinnitus due to lack of evidence that they work. This takes into consideration extensive research on vitamins, melatonin, zinc, and other dietary supplements. What are your thoughts on this?*

JG: It's an unfortunate reality that there are fewer studies on natural agents, especially in the United States. Frankly, there are less financial incentives to fund studies on natural agents because they cannot be patented. The risk of side effects is low to none on the agents mentioned in this article; but guidance from a licensed Naturopathic Physician or an Integrative Physician can be helpful when someone wants to pursue a natural approach to address the root causes of illness.

JO: *Is there such a thing as culinary medicine for tinnitus and/or hearing health?*

JG: There is no diet that is specifically recommended for tinnitus. Some people find cutting out or limiting caffeine can be helpful, while others don't notice the difference. Eating a low sodium diet benefits some people, but not others. Salt is associated with fluid retention, which has the potential to exacerbate tinnitus. Making healthy dietary changes by strictly limiting processed foods or fast foods may be beneficial; but, one has to find what works best in their unique situation. Alcohol has been thought to be both an inhibitor and a promoter of tinnitus. Again, an individualized approach is best.

To learn more about naturopathic medicine, visit www.naturopathic.org. 



Judy Gianni, NMD, is a licensed naturopathic physician in private practice in Tucson, Ariz., with 23 years of experience. She uses natural and integrative therapies to help her patients heal and feel

their best. She mentors medical doctors in treating patients with botanical, homeopathic, and other natural agents, along with guidance on how diet and lifestyle changes can bring about optimal health and reversal of disease.

- 1 Luzzi R, et al. (2014). Improvement in symptoms and cochlear flow with pycnogenol in patients with Meniere's disease and tinnitus. *Minerva Med.* Jun; 105(3): 245-54.
- 2 Arda HN, et al. (2003) The role of zinc in the treatment of tinnitus. *Otol Neurotol.* Jan;24(1):86-9.
- 3 National Research Council (US) Committee on Hearing, Bioacoustics, and Biomechanics. *Tinnitus: Facts, Theories, and Treatments.* Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 1982. 4, Treatments.
- 4 Charu Singh, Rahul Kawatra, et al. Therapeutic role of vitamin B₁₂ in patients of chronic tinnitus: a pilot study. *Noise Health.* 2016 Mar-Apr; 18(81): 93-97.
- 5 Megwalu UC, et al. (2006). The effects of melatonin on tinnitus and sleep. *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg.* Feb; 134(2):210-3.