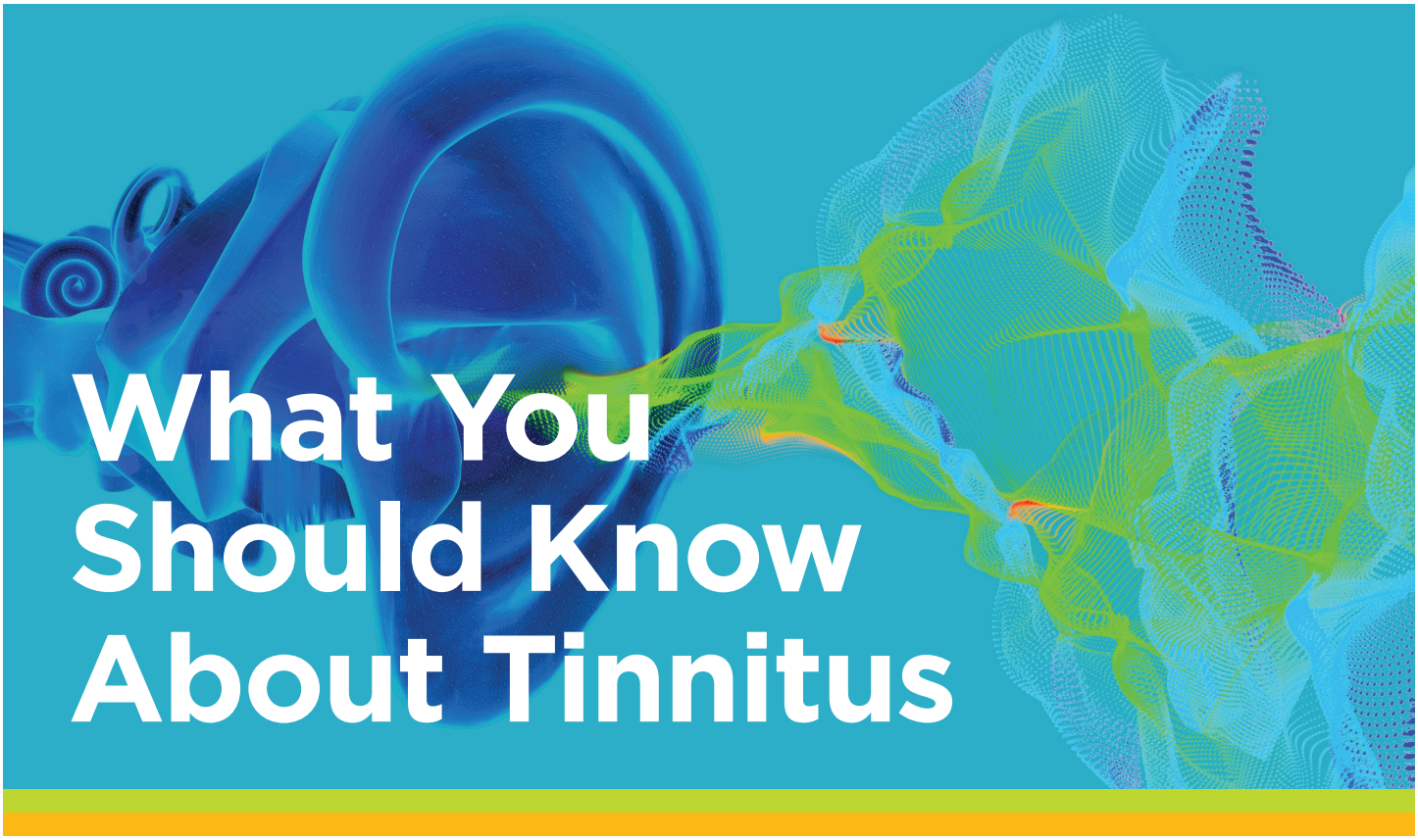

What You Should Know About Tinnitus

Tinnitus (pronounced tin-NIGH-tis or TIN-uh-tis) is typically described as ringing in the ears but can include other sounds, such as clicking, roaring, whooshing, or buzzing. It can be heard in one or both ears, in your head, or outside of your head. Some people hear multiple sounds, and the pitch and loudness vary between individuals. Tinnitus is often considered to be a sign of damage to the ear, causing a disruption in how sound is transmitted to and processed in the brain.

What Causes Tinnitus?

Tinnitus is typically caused by noise-induced hearing loss. Other common causes include:

- Earwax blocking the ear canal
- Age-related hearing loss
- Acoustic trauma, meaning sudden exposure to loud noise from such things as firecrackers, gunshot blast, emergency alarm, or proximity to loud speakers at a concert.
- Ototoxic drugs that damage the ear, including platinum-based drugs for cancer treatment, quinine-based medications, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and some antidepressants.
- Head injury
- Temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJ)
- Stress

What Should You Do When You Have Tinnitus?

Many people don't know what triggered their tinnitus. Once you have it, it's important to be seen by an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat doctor) to rule out possible, but unlikely, underlying medical issues, such as a tumor. The next step is to see an audiologist to have your hearing checked. Approximately 80 percent of people with tinnitus have some hearing loss, so it's important to have an audiogram to determine your baseline of hearing acuity. Even if you opt not to get hearing aids, understanding how much hearing loss you have is useful information. An audiologist trained in tinnitus management can also explain different types of tinnitus treatments and management techniques.

Is Tinnitus a Problem?

Approximately 25 million Americans, or about 10 percent of the adult population, experience tinnitus in any given year. Among those, millions have chronic tinnitus, meaning that the sound doesn't fade away. For most of those people, the tinnitus isn't considered bothersome because it doesn't interfere with sleep, concentration, and/or hearing. However, some people are so bothered by it that it triggers anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Researchers aren't sure why some people are bothered by it while others can easily ignore it. Once you've been cleared of possible underlying medical issues, it's important to seek help if tinnitus bothers you or is causing emotional anguish.

How Do You Manage Tinnitus?

Sound therapy can refer to the use of sound to draw your attention away from the sound of tinnitus. This is called masking and is as simple as playing low-level background music, turning on a fan, or playing nature sounds on your computer/through your headphones while you work. Sound therapy also refers to treatments, which are overseen by an audiologist, that aim to reduce the perception of tinnitus by retraining the brain.

Masking devices:

- Free apps, including Whist, Relax Melodies, Resound Relief, White Noise Lite
- Tabletop sound generators

To help with sleep:

- Tabletop sound generators, pillows with built-in sound generators, fleece headband with built-in sound maskers

Does Lifestyle Matter?

Tinnitus can be aggravated by salt, caffeine, preservatives, and alcohol, so it can be helpful to keep a food diary to assess if such things affect you. Each person's tinnitus is different, as are the things that can cause spikes. However, most people benefit from stress management that includes regular exercise and maintaining a healthy diet. Many people find meditation and yoga to be helpful.

- Protect your hearing by using earplugs and limiting time in loud environments
- Manage stress through exercise, diet, sleep, meditation, yoga

Who Can Help?

Tinnitus can be frustrating to explain to loved ones because it is a noise that only you can hear. Also, many people experience "ringing in the ears" and aren't bothered by it, or had it fade away, so they don't understand your distress. Find a healthcare provider knowledgeable in tinnitus management and attend a tinnitus support group. The American Tinnitus Association can assist you in finding healthcare providers and support groups in your local area.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and sound therapy have been found to be the most effective research-based therapies for reducing tinnitus distress. If a therapist doesn't know much about tinnitus, they can use the treatment protocol for pain management, which shares many similarities with tinnitus treatment. To find a therapist in your area, see www.psychologytoday.com

How Do You Find Useful Information and Help?

The American Tinnitus Association website, www.ATA.org, offers extensive information on tinnitus, its management, research progress, healthcare providers, and support groups, among other things. Staff can be reached by calling 1-800-634-8978.

AMERICAN TINNITUS ASSOCIATION

The mission and core purpose of the ATA are to promote relief, help prevent, and find cures for tinnitus evidenced by its core values of compassion, credibility, and responsibility.

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