

JANUARY 4, 2004

Tinnitus — ringing in our ears

Tinnitus, which occurs in 12 percent of the population, is awareness of a sound that does not originate from an external source. There are two main types, subjective and objective. The much more common is the subjective, for which an underlying cause is seldom found and the treatment difficult. This occurs more in older white males than younger non-white females. This tinnitus is described as ringing, cricket-like, buzzing, whistling, hissing or humming. It is usually associated with a hearing loss and can be in one or both ears. Very, very rarely, nonverbal auditory hallucinations such as crashing or train-like sounds are noted. This variety of subjective tinnitus is the phantom noise associated with abnormality in the auditory pathways, the cortex and even the emotional limbic system.

With the objective variety of tinnitus, "real sounds" are audible only to the listener. They include debris in the ear, the flowing of blood, or muscular contraction in the palate or Eustachian tube. These are typically described as pulsating, clicking or fluttering.

Some folks have brief bursts of sound, but in general, the sounds come and go for the rest of the patient's life and is more of a medical nuisance than a true medical problem. An over-diagnosed disease is Meniere's, which is a low pitch, roaring noise associated with vertigo, ear pressure and a gradual hearing loss. A rare cause of tinnitus and ones that doctors worry about is a tumor of the acoustic nerve

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(acoustic neuroma). These are unilateral, progressive and unless diagnosed early on, can lead to permanent damage of the ear.

The treatment depends on the cause, if it can be found. In the older person with hearing loss, all that is needed is reassurance after the easily identifiable factors are ruled out.

Tinnitus frequently improves by decreasing alcohol, nicotine and caffeine intake, better sleep and decreased stress. Other treatments include Niacin, B vitamins, zinc, ginkgo biloba, antidepressants, neuro-modulators (GabitrilR), craniosacral therapy, chiropractic manipulation, acupuncture (particularly in the external ear) and homeopathics. I have had some success with OtopomR by Energique, a mixture of cloves, thyme and echinacea which is dropped in the ear. When nothing works and the patient is disabled by their problem, a masking device emitting white noise is used. These can be inserted in the ear canal similar to a hearing aid. For more information, one can contact the American Tinnitus Association at www.ata.org/.