# Tinnitus

## What is tinnitus

Tinnitus is the perception of sound when no external sound is present. It is commonly described as ringing, buzzing, hissing, or humming in the ears. Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease, and can be temporary or persistent.

## What causes tinnitus

Tinnitus can have many causes, including:

- Age-related hearing loss.
- Exposure to loud noise.
- Earwax blockage.
- Ear infections or middle ear problems.
- Certain medications.
- Stress and anxiety.
- Hearing loss or inner ear damage.
- Less commonly, vascular or neurological issues.

## Symptoms

- Ringing, buzzing, or humming in one or both ears.
- Sounds may be constant or come and go.
- Can be more noticeable in quiet settings or at night.
- May be associated with hearing loss or ear fullness.

## Is tinnitus serious

Tinnitus is not usually a sign of a serious problem, but it can be distressing and impact quality of life. Rarely, it may be a sign of an underlying condition that needs investigation.

## Diagnosis

Your GP or ENT specialist may examine your ears and conduct hearing tests (audiometry). You may be referred for further tests if the tinnitus is one-sided, pulsatile (matches your heartbeat), or associated with other unusual symptoms.

## Treatment

There is no single cure for tinnitus, but several strategies can help manage it:

- Information and support: understanding tinnitus and its assessment can reduce worry.
- Treat underlying causes: such as earwax or hearing loss.
- Hearing aids: for those with hearing loss.
- Gentle background sound may make tinnitus less noticeable. Evidence for formal sound therapy is uncertain; choose an approach you find comfortable.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): helps manage emotional response.
- Relaxation techniques: to reduce stress and anxiety.

## Self-care tips

- Avoid silence – use low-level background sounds.
- Protect your ears from loud noise.
- Reduce caffeine and alcohol if they worsen symptoms.

- Stay active and manage stress.
- Keep a regular sleep routine.

## When to see a doctor

Seek urgent assessment the same day for tinnitus with sudden hearing loss. Do not wait for a routine hearing appointment.

Call 999 for tinnitus with new facial weakness or other stroke symptoms, or severe sudden vertigo with inability to stand or walk.

Arrange a medical review for persistent tinnitus in one ear, a sound in time with your pulse, or symptoms affecting sleep or daily life.

If distress makes you feel unable to keep yourself safe, seek emergency help immediately through 999 or A&E.

## About this information

This leaflet explains the condition and common treatment choices. Your care team will advise what is suitable for you. If you have an operation, follow the specific preparation and aftercare instructions provided by your hospital.

## Further information

NICE NG155 recommendations

NICE NG155 rationale