

TINNITUS:

WHAT IS IT, AND HOW DO WE MANAGE IT?

By Lorrie Matarazzo

The perception of sound, when no actual external noise is present, is commonly referred to as tinnitus, and it is much more common than people think. According to Statistics Canada (2019), an estimated 37% of adult Canadians (or approx. 9.2 million people) have experienced tinnitus in the past year. Most patients describe tinnitus as the perception of ringing, buzzing, hissing, and roaring, among other less common sounds. For many people, it is a passing sound that only happens occasionally; however, for some, the sound is always present with little to no relief.



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For those that experience bothersome tinnitus, they may report sleep disturbances, difficulty with concentration, anxiety, depression, stress, and a variety of challenges in their relationships.

Tinnitus is not a disease; it is a symptom of an underlying condition. The most common causes of tinnitus are age-related hearing loss, noise-induced hearing loss, blockages in the ear canal, head/neck trauma, certain medications, and certain medical conditions. It is always recommended to have a hearing assessment and to speak to your physician about your tinnitus, especially when it affects only one ear, is pulsatile (hearing your heartbeat in the ear), has a sudden onset, or is chronic. Once medical concerns have been ruled out, the focus becomes the management of tinnitus.

Although there is no known cure for tinnitus, there are many strategies that can help manage tinnitus to help reduce one's perception of it over time and its overall impact on one's quality of life. When hearing loss is present, it is critical that it be treated appropriately. Other management strategies include sound therapy, stress reduction techniques, practising good sleep hygiene, and possibly seeing a counsellor for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Implementing one or more of these strategies can be very beneficial and are known to help individuals to better cope with their tinnitus.

While the actual perception of tinnitus may persist, many people will naturally begin to habituate to the sound over time. The brain will eventually "lose interest" and will stop paying so much attention to it.

On a preventative front, hearing protection should always be worn when exposed to loud industrial or recreational noise, loud music, hunting etc. There are many types of over-the-counter and custom-made hearing protection available. If you would like further information or education regarding tinnitus or hearing protection, contact an audiologist to book a consultation.



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