

How to help friends and family with tinnitus

You'll find this factsheet useful if someone close to you has tinnitus (noises in the ear(s) or head). It explains what tinnitus is, how it can be managed, and how you can offer your support.

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i If you'd like this factsheet in Braille, large print or audio, please contact our Information Line - see last page for contact details.



Note: We use the word 'partner' in this factsheet for convenience, but the difficulties experienced, and the ways in which you can help, apply to anyone you're close to.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the name for sounds that some people hear in their ear(s) or head, which don't have an external source.

There are two types of tinnitus:

1. Subjective tinnitus is the most common type, affecting around 10% of adults in the UK – and many children. Most often, this type of tinnitus is linked to problems within the hearing system. It is called 'subjective' because only the person with tinnitus can hear the sounds.

2. Objective tinnitus is very rare. It is the awareness of a sound within the body such as blood flow or muscle activity in or around the ear. This type of tinnitus is called 'objective' because a clinician, using a stethoscope placed near the affected ear(s), can also hear it.

This factsheet focuses on **subjective tinnitus**.

What does tinnitus sound like?

People usually experience tinnitus as a ringing, hissing, buzzing, roaring or humming sound. There may be a single sound or two or more, and the sounds may be continuous or come and go.

A small number of people experience tinnitus as fragments of tunes or songs (known as musical hallucinations), or hear rhythmical noises that may beat in time with their heart (pulsatile tinnitus).

i To find out more about these rare types of tinnitus, see our factsheets *Musical hallucinations* and *Pulsatile tinnitus*.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus is usually a symptom of a problem within the hearing system. Research has shown that it can be linked to different things, including:

- hearing loss
- exposure to loud noise
- certain medications
- ear or head injuries
- some ear conditions and infections
- emotional stress
- metabolic and neurological disorders.

However, sometimes there is no recognisable link. The exact causes of tinnitus aren't yet fully understood and research is ongoing.

i For more information on what tinnitus can be linked to, see our factsheet *Tinnitus – causes and therapies*.

Is there a cure for tinnitus?

While there are practical steps people can take to manage their tinnitus, there are no safe and effective cures to silence it.

Our tinnitus research is focused on better understanding how tinnitus starts and progresses, so this knowledge can be used to develop a range of cures ([see page 9](#)). Of course, if your partner has tinnitus that has an underlying cause, such as an ear infection, successfully treating that may get rid of their tinnitus. Your partner should see their GP as soon as they notice their tinnitus ([see page 5](#)), so possible causes can be investigated.

The good news is that most people find that their tinnitus slowly improves over time. This is because the brain gradually learns to 'filter out' tinnitus, so it becomes less intrusive. The process is called 'habituation' - it is the main goal of tinnitus therapies.

How does tinnitus affect people?

Tinnitus can affect people in different ways. Most people who have tinnitus aren't troubled by it and may only notice it occasionally. However, some people with tinnitus find that it has a serious impact on their quality of life, causing sleep problems, stress, anxiety and other difficulties. It can also have a negative effect on personal relationships.

How loud tinnitus is, or what it sounds like, doesn't seem to make a difference to whether it troubles people or not.

When people first get tinnitus, they may worry that it's a sign of a serious illness, though this is rarely the case. They may also worry that their tinnitus will get louder, or go on forever, or that they'll never be able to enjoy complete silence again.

Unfortunately, when someone gets stressed about their tinnitus, and so focuses their attention on it, this can make it worse - which, in turn, can cause more stress. If this happens to your partner, it's important for them to remember that help is available and that, with time and support, they can learn to manage their tinnitus ([see page 5](#) onwards).

What difficulties might someone with tinnitus face?

Reactions to tinnitus vary from person to person, but sometimes difficulties can arise. They are often at their worst when a person first develops tinnitus, but they can be experienced at any stage.

Your partner may experience all, some or none of the following difficulties. They may have other reactions that are not listed. All responses to tinnitus are personal and valid. It's crucial that you accept, and respond sensitively to, whatever your partner is feeling.

Emotional difficulties

- **Anger** – your partner may feel angry that they have tinnitus or feel that it is unfair – “why me?”
- **Frustration** – this may arise if your partner feels that they can’t escape their tinnitus. It might make them irritable and more short-tempered. They may also feel frustrated that there’s not yet a cure for tinnitus.
- **Confusion** – your partner may feel confused about why they have tinnitus, especially as it can develop for no apparent reason.
- **Stress** – this is the body’s natural response to anything that upsets normal life or routines. While good in small doses, prolonged stress can be harmful. Tinnitus may cause your partner to feel tense, overwhelmed and unable to cope. Some people – though not all – find that stress makes their tinnitus more noticeable, which, in turn, leads to further stress and anxiety.
- **Anxiety or fear** – tinnitus can cause anxiety by its constant presence. It can also make people anxious about their physical and mental health. Some people fear that their tinnitus is a sign of a serious illness (this is rarely the case).
- **Depression** – this can be an emotional consequence of many long-term physical conditions and illnesses. However, the nature and origin of depression can be complex and may have causes other than tinnitus alone.
- **Guilt or self-blame** – your partner may feel guilty about being unable to cope with their tinnitus or about the strain it puts on marital and family relationships. The knowledge that tinnitus is not life threatening can also be a source of guilt. They might think, “How can I fail to cope with something like this when some people have to cope with more serious illnesses?” Your partner may feel guilty that they talk about their tinnitus a lot. They might also think that their tinnitus is self-inflicted and blame themselves – for listening to loud music, for example.
- **Feelings of loss** – these may arise if your partner used to place great value on silence. Feelings of loss can also deepen frustration.
- **Isolation** – your partner may feel that nobody else understands, or is experiencing, what they are going through.

Practical difficulties

- **Sleep problems** – some people with tinnitus may experience sleep disturbances. Worrying about not getting enough sleep or tinnitus can have an impact on sleep. However, many people with tinnitus do sleep well.
- **Difficulty with sound sensitivity (hyperacusis)** – some people who have tinnitus also have hyperacusis, which means they are more sensitive than normal to everyday sounds. Your partner may find sound in general, or certain sounds, uncomfortable or painfully loud, even if they don’t bother other people.

- **Difficulty relaxing** – your partner might have difficulty relaxing because of tinnitus-related stress.

There are many things that can help your partner to avoid or overcome these difficulties, as the next section explains.

 You may be interested in our factsheets *Stress and tinnitus* and *Hyperacusis*.

Are you also missing sleep?

If your partner has trouble sleeping because of their tinnitus, and you share the same bed, you might find that your sleep is also disturbed.

Your partner may be restless or get up frequently during the night. Anything that helps them to relax is useful. For example, it might be helpful to go to sleep with a TV or radio on, to distract them from their tinnitus. If this noise keeps you awake, your partner could try a pillow speaker or sound pillow, so only they can hear the sounds.

If your sleep is affected, discuss it with your partner and seek solutions together. Although some tensions are inevitable, try not to get angry with your partner or blame them, as they are likely to be as tired and frustrated as you – if not more so.

What can people do to manage their tinnitus?

Get specialist help

If your partner thinks they have tinnitus but they haven't had it diagnosed, they should see their GP. It may be that their tinnitus is caused by a temporary problem that their GP can treat, such as an ear infection or excess ear wax. If this isn't the case, their GP should refer them to the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department of their local hospital or a local audiology service for further tests.

A hearing specialist will be able to give your partner information about their tinnitus and its possible causes. They may recommend that your partner attend a tinnitus clinic, which are usually run by audiologists, hearing therapists and, occasionally, psychologists. They offer different therapies, including counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), sound therapy ([see page 6](#)) and relaxation exercises. They can also help with hyperacusis (increased sensitivity to noise). The therapies offered to your partner will depend on the nature of their tinnitus and how it affects them.

If your partner's GP doesn't refer them for further tests and their tinnitus doesn't get any better, they should see another GP. They have a right to a second opinion.

Try sound therapy

Many people find that they are more aware of their tinnitus in a quiet environment. Sound therapy (or 'sound enrichment') works by filling the silence with sounds that distract people from paying attention to their tinnitus, making it less intrusive.

Your partner may be given **behind-the-ear or in-the-ear sound generators** from the NHS, if appropriate – or they can buy them from a private hearing aid dispenser. The sound generators play soft 'rushing' sounds, similar to the sound of a TV or radio station that has no signal.

If your partner has hearing loss as well as tinnitus, they may be offered a **combination device** that contains both a hearing aid and a sound generator.

Alternatively, your partner may find **bedside and desktop sound generators** – often known as 'tinnitus relaxers' – helpful. These products produce a range of soothing sounds to distract people from their tinnitus. They are particularly useful at night, as they can be used with pillow speakers. Tinnitus relaxers may be available free from the NHS (although different audiology departments have different budgets for equipment), and they can also be bought.

The type of sound generator that your partner might be offered from the NHS will depend on what's available, and what's most appropriate for their needs.

Your partner can also buy **CDs** and **download albums** of soothing sounds – or they may find that environmental sounds help, such as the whirring of an electric fan. They can also try **tinnitus apps** (software applications) for mobile and tablet devices. These have a wide range of sounds to choose from.

Use hearing aids, if they also have hearing loss

Two-thirds of people with tinnitus also have hearing loss (but many people with hearing loss don't have tinnitus). Hearing aids can help with tinnitus by:

- helping to compensate for hearing loss
- making environmental sounds louder, which can provide distraction from tinnitus
- reducing listening effort, improving communication and, thereby, reducing any stress or anxiety that may be associated with hearing loss.

If your partner has hearing loss as well as tinnitus, they will be offered hearing aids or a combination device.

Your partner should speak to their GP if they think they need hearing aids, and read our free leaflet *Getting hearing aids*.

Take time to relax

Stress doesn't directly cause tinnitus, but research suggests that tinnitus can sometimes coincide with, or follow, a period of stress – and stress can make tinnitus worse.

There are different things your partner can do to avoid or reduce stress:

- **Be active** – exercise, including non-strenuous activities such as gardening and walking, won't make your partner's stress disappear, but it will help to clear their mind and enable them to deal with problems more calmly.
- **Learn relaxation exercises** – a regular relaxation routine can help your partner to manage the stress that is often associated with tinnitus. They can learn relaxation exercises from books, CDs, DVDs, apps or relaxation classes, which are taught in many tinnitus clinics and audiology departments. They can also try local adult education classes that specialise in relaxation techniques, as well as yoga or mindfulness classes.
- **Practise mindfulness meditation** – paying more attention to the present moment – to their own thoughts and feelings, and the world around them – may help your partner to notice signs of stress or anxiety earlier, and help them deal with them better. You can learn more about mindfulness on the NHS Choices website: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx#what
- **Try counselling** – if your partner finds their tinnitus distressing, they may benefit from being able to talk to a professional who will listen and show understanding. It can help to relieve their fears and, therefore, reduce their stress and anxiety levels. Your partner should speak to their GP or audiologist about getting a referral. If they decide to go private, they should look for a counsellor who is fully qualified and registered with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy ([see page 10](#) for contact details). It may help if the counsellor has some knowledge of tinnitus.
- **Listen to tinnitus relaxers, sound-therapy apps or soothing music** ([see page 6](#)).
- **Try complementary therapies** – such as acupuncture and reflexology. Make sure your partner finds a good, well-informed therapist. While there is very little conclusive evidence to prove or disprove the usefulness of a particular complementary therapy in relation to tinnitus, these therapies may help to reduce the stress and anxiety associated with it.
- **Share experiences** – some people find that sharing experiences and information with others in similar positions can be really helpful. There's a network of tinnitus support groups across the UK – most are connected to the British Tinnitus Association ([see page 10](#) for contact details). They tend to meet up once a month and often include a talk on a tinnitus-related issue. Your partner may also wish to get in touch with others and share tips online through our online Tinnitus forum ([see page 10](#)).

Minimising their stress levels will also help your partner to sleep well.

 For more information, see our factsheet *Stress and tinnitus*.

How can I show my support?

As well as encouraging your partner to take steps to manage their tinnitus, you can provide extra support in the following ways:

Learn more about tinnitus

This will help you to better support your partner. You can visit the tinnitus section of our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/tinnitus and read the other factsheets in this range ([see page 9](#)). Remember, though, that tinnitus affects everyone differently, so the best thing you can do is ask your partner exactly how their tinnitus affects them.

Listen and understand

This is vital, whether your partner has just developed tinnitus or has lived with it for some time. Simply allowing your partner to speak freely about their difficulties can bring them enormous relief and may reduce the impact it has on their life. Although you might feel a natural urge to be positive or cheer your partner up, contradicting or denying what your partner is feeling isn't always the best approach. Such responses, however well meaning, can unintentionally deepen the isolation and frustration your partner might be experiencing.

You may find that sympathetically accepting what your partner says is the best way to validate and respect their feelings. It's probably best not to ask about their tinnitus all the time, as this will keep drawing their attention to it. Try to keep a balance and ask them how you could help.

Offer to go with your partner to medical appointments

Your partner may find that visits to their GP or hearing specialist make them feel anxious. You could offer to go with them – a little moral support can go a long way. It's likely that your partner will be given a great deal of information at their medical appointments, but they won't be able to remember all of it. If two of you are present, you're both likely to learn more, as together you can take in more information – and go over what was discussed, afterwards. Even if your partner chooses to go alone, offering to go with them is a good way to show your care and concern.

What tinnitus research is Action on Hearing Loss funding?

There are currently no medicines on the market specifically approved to treat tinnitus – we're looking to change this. We're funding a range of projects that focus on improving our understanding of how tinnitus starts and progresses, so that this knowledge can be used to develop effective treatments.

We've also awarded a grant to researchers at Newcastle University, who aim to develop a new technique to measure tinnitus more accurately by monitoring brainwave activity. This new technique will help tinnitus researchers take potential new treatments that have been tested in the laboratory to the next stage – testing them on people, a critical step in developing new medicines.

This research should make the future development of effective medicines to treat tinnitus easier and, hopefully, encourage more investment in this area.



Find out more about the research we're funding at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/biomedicalresearch

Where can I get further information about tinnitus?

Action on Hearing Loss

Our leaflet *Understanding tinnitus* provides a concise introduction to tinnitus. Our other **Tinnitus** factsheets are:

- *Tinnitus – causes and therapies*
- *Stress and tinnitus*
- *Pulsatile tinnitus*
- *Musical hallucinations.*

You can order these from our Information Line ([see last page](#) for contact details) or download them from our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/tinnitusfacts

You can also find lots of helpful information about tinnitus on our website: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/tinnitus

Tinnitus Helpline

For tinnitus information and support, contact our Tinnitus Helpline:

Telephone: **0808 808 6666**

Textphone: **0808 808 9000**

SMS: **0780 000 0360**

Email: tinnitushelpline@hearingloss.org.uk

Tinnitus forum

Get in touch with a supportive group of people with tinnitus through our online Tinnitus forum. Share what works for you, and pick up some other great tips: actionhearingloss.org.uk/tinnitusforum

Social networking

You can also get in touch with us, and others, through Facebook and Twitter:

Facebook: facebook.com/actiononhearingloss

Twitter: twitter.com/actiononhearing

Other organisations

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP can give you a list of therapists in your area.

BACP House
15 St John's Business Park
Lutterworth
Leicestershire
LE17 4HB

Telephone: **01455 883 300**
Textphone: **01455 560 606**
Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk
Website: bacp.co.uk

British Tinnitus Association (BTA)

The BTA campaigns for better services for people with tinnitus. It supports a network of tinnitus groups, provides a range of publications and produces a quarterly members' magazine, *Quiet*.

Ground Floor
Unit 5, Acorn Business Park
Woodseats Close
Sheffield
S8 0TB

Telephone: **0800 018 0527**
Email: info@tinnitus.org.uk
Website: tinnitus.org.uk

Information you can trust

The Information Standard certifies us as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information.

Thank you to **Magdalena Sereda, Senior Research Fellow in Tinnitus, NIHR Nottingham Biomedical Research Centre, British Tinnitus Association Head of Research**, for helping us review and update this factsheet, published August 2017.

For a list of references for this factsheet, please email us at references@hearingloss.org.uk

Did you find this factsheet helpful?

We'd love to know what you think of this factsheet - please email us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

If you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones, please let us know.

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our expert information covers everything you need to know about:

- hearing loss and deafness
- tinnitus
- ear problems and treatments
- hearing aids and cochlear implants
- useful products and technology
- communication tactics and support
- benefits and grants
- your rights.

Visit our website actiononhearingloss.org.uk or call our Information Line ([see last page](#)) for information, support and publications. You can also find out about services in your area, our hearing research, and how you can get involved.

Please help us support others

We provide our leaflets, factsheets and Information Line service free of charge to anyone affected by deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss in the UK. We rely on the generosity of our supporters to help us do this. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a donation - of as little or as much as you can afford.

Please send a cheque, payable to Action on Hearing Loss, to:

Freepost RTLX-CZKX-BTTZ
Action on Hearing Loss
1-3 Highbury Station Road
London N1 1SE
(No stamp needed)

Donate online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/icanhelp
Or make a donation over the phone by credit or debit card:

 **0203 227 6182**
 **0203 227 6185**

Thank you.

Our purpose is to help people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose. We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss Information Line

Telephone **0808 808 0123**
Textphone **0808 808 9000**
SMS **0780 000 0360**
(standard text message rates apply)
Email **information@hearingloss.org.uk**

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