
TINNITUS

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is a phantom sound or noise perceived in the ear(s) most often described as “buzzing, ringing, crickets, whistling, humming, static, high pitch tone”. It may range from extremely mild and intermittent sound, to highly incapacitating, continuous noise. It is common problem, about 1 in 5 people have it. Quite often, for the patient suffering from chronic, annoying, or debilitating tinnitus, hearing loss is a major concern. Approximately, 80% of all people with sensorineural hearing loss (SNHL) have tinnitus, and 80% of all people with tinnitus have SNHL.

Types and causes of tinnitus: There are 3 types of tinnitus

1. Non -pulsatile tinnitus: It is the most common type of tinnitus, representing 90-95% of all tinnitus presentations. It occurs in the absence of a known external stimulus. The usual causes are hearing loss (mostly sensorineural loss, sometimes conductive loss), Meniere’s disease, patients who have had surgery in their ears, some drugs like salicylates in high dosage, streptomycin, quinine like drugs for malaria, and certain anti-anxiety pills. In most cases the cause remains unknown.
2. Pulsatile tinnitus: This type is heard by the patient and the physician, and has a physical sound source. It is usually due to a disorder in the blood supply in the head and neck, or dysfunction of some muscles of the throat.

Management of tinnitus: The management of tinnitus is tailor-made for each patient. The following are some of the techniques used to help patients cope with tinnitus.

- Tinnitus Retraining Therapy (TRT): The goal of this therapy is to habituate the person to their tinnitus with the help of counselling sessions combined with sound therapy using tinnitus masking devices (constant low level broad band sound). This therapy is usually provided by audiologists specially trained in TRT.
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT): This treatment is offered by psychologists that helps people cope better with on going symptoms like tinnitus.
- Drugs play little or no role in the management of tinnitus. Anti-anxiety pills or sleeping pills are sometimes prescribed for patients with severe tinnitus.
- Tinnitus may be treated with hearing aids or masking devices.
- Patients who have trouble falling asleep due to their tinnitus are advised to tune into FM static between stations, or asked to have a ceiling or table fan turned to full speed, to provide a constant noise to override their tinnitus.