PATIENT HANDOUT. Please feel free to copy and distribute this page.

Tinnitus

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is when you hear sounds like ringing, buzzing, hissing, or clicking when nothing around you is making that sound. You might hear it in one ear or both ears. The sound might be constant, or it might come and go. Tinnitus is common—about 4 in 10 adult Canadians had it in the past year.

What causes tinnitus?

Tinnitus is not a disease—it's a symptom that is usually caused by changes to the hearing system. Other causes include ear infections, earwax buildup, and certain medications. Stress and anxiety can make it worse.

Is tinnitus serious?

Tinnitus isn't a sign of a serious health problem most of the time. But it can make some people feel stressed, worried, or sad. It can also make it hard to hear or sleep. Your doctor can help you find ways to make the noise less bothersome.

How is the cause of tinnitus diagnosed?

Your doctor may do the following:

- Ask about your health history and look in your ears
- Send you for a hearing test
- Order other tests if needed

About 9 in 10 people with tinnitus also have some hearing loss, so a hearing test is important.

How is tinnitus treated?

Treatment depends on the cause. Often, the cause is unknown and there is no cure yet. Here are some ways to make it easier to live with tinnitus:

- ***Sound therapy***
  Tinnitus is usually more bothersome in quiet places. Try using soft background sounds, such as a fan, quiet music, or a sound machine, to help cover it up and make it less noticeable.
- ***Hearing aids***
  If you have hearing loss, hearing aids might help you hear better and notice the tinnitus less. Some hearing aids have built-in sound generators to help mask the tinnitus.
- ***Counselling and support***
  Stress can make tinnitus worse. Talking with a counsellor can help you deal with stress, sleep better, and feel more in control. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can teach you how to cope with and react differently to tinnitus.
- ***Medication***
  If you feel sad or anxious, your doctor might suggest medication to help with those feelings.

NOTES

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Sources: 1) Dalrymple SN, Lewis SH, Philman S. Tinnitus: diagnosis and management. *Am Fam Physician*. 2021;103:663-71; **2)** Ellis S, Wilson R, Dolan S. Tinnitus: systematic approach to primary care assessment and management. *Br J Gen Pract*. 2022;72:190-2; 3) Tunkel DE, Bauer CA, Sun GH, et al. Clinical practice guideline: tinnitus. *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg*. 2014;151:S1-S40.

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