

Patient education: Tinnitus (ringing in the ears) (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is tinnitus? — Tinnitus is the term doctors use when a person hears ringing, buzzing, hissing, or roaring in one or both ears. Many people have this problem. In some people, it can last months or years. Tinnitus can be annoying, but it is not usually a sign of a serious problem.

What causes tinnitus? — Tinnitus is often caused by damage to cells in a part of the inner ear ([figure 1](#)). When these cells are damaged, they send signals to the brain that make you think you are hearing things that are not really there.

The damage that leads to tinnitus can be caused by:

- Normal aging and hearing loss
- Loud noise
- Medicines, including some antibiotics, anti-seizure medicines, and painkillers
- Head or neck injuries
- Certain diseases

What are the symptoms of tinnitus? — Most people with tinnitus hear a high-pitched, steady ringing. Some people with the condition hear pulsing, rushing, or humming sounds. These sounds sometimes get louder or softer during movement or exercise.

Should I see a doctor or nurse about the ringing in my ears? — Yes. If you hear ringing or other sounds that the people around you do not hear, see your doctor or nurse. He or she can run tests to make sure there is nothing seriously wrong with your ears.

Is there a treatment for tinnitus? — Doctors cannot usually cure tinnitus. But they can often offer treatments and techniques that make it easier to live with. Possible treatments include:

- **Hearing aids** – People whose tinnitus is caused by hearing loss often find that they are less bothered by their tinnitus if they get a hearing aid. Hearing aids make outside sounds clearer and louder, which helps make tinnitus less noticeable.
- **Tinnitus retraining therapy** – During “tinnitus retraining therapy,” or TRT, you work with a tinnitus expert to retrain your brain. You learn to view the ringing in your ears as normal background sounds rather than annoying distractions. Over time the sounds bother you less.
- **Sounds that cover up tinnitus** – People can sometimes cover up or “mask” the ringing in their ears by listening to music or other soft sounds. There is even a device similar to a hearing aid that makes a sound to “mask” tinnitus.
- **Biofeedback** – During biofeedback, you learn to breathe deeply when you hear the ringing and change your reaction to it in other ways. The technique helps you to relax and be less bothered by the sounds.
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy** – During cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), you talk with a psychologist or counselor. It teaches you ways to cope with tinnitus and ways to distract yourself. It also teaches you to see tinnitus in a new way.
- **Unproven treatments** – Other treatments for tinnitus include electrical stimulation, acupuncture, and herbs. None of these treatments have been proven to work. But some people say they help. Always tell your doctor or nurse about any herbs you decide to try.

What will my life be like? — If you have had tinnitus for a long time, it probably is not going to go away. But it might bother you less over time.

Try not to let yourself become depressed by your condition. And if you do feel down, ask your doctor or nurse for advice. Depression is common in people with tinnitus. But good treatments for depression are available.

If your tinnitus makes it hard to sleep, talk to your doctor or nurse about that, too. Losing sleep can make life even harder to cope with. But there might be treatments or strategies for you to try.

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