



What is tinnitus?

The word *tinnitus* (pronounced **tinn**-itus) means 'tinkling or ringing like a bell'. Sounds cute? It isn't!

Tinnitus is a physical condition experienced as noise or ringing in the ears or head when no such external noise is present. It is usually caused by a fault in the hearing system—it is a symptom, not the disease itself.

There are many causes. In fact, anything that can go wrong with our ears can produce tinnitus as a symptom, perhaps something as simple as wax against the eardrum or as serious as a tumour on the hearing nerve. A major cause of tinnitus is exposure to excessive noise, such as chainsaws, machinery and rock concerts. Noise destroys!

Research continues but the actual mechanisms or processes of tinnitus are not yet fully understood. It is known that tinnitus is real and not imagined, and that it is a symptom of a malfunction, usually somewhere in the hearing system (including the ear and the brain).

Millions of people around the world suffer from tinnitus and it is estimated that twenty per cent of Australians have tinnitus at some time in their lives.

What can make tinnitus worse?

1. **Loud noise!** Exposure to sudden or long-term noise can damage the hearing with resultant deafness and tinnitus. High-risk groups include industrial workers, farmers, transport workers—and gardeners with noisy lawnmowers! People at risk should reduce the noise source or protect their ears with earplugs or ear muffs. Leisure noise can also be a hazard, such as rock concerts, boom boxes in cars and the misuse of an iPod or mp3 player—never play them loudly.
2. **Stress and fatigue.** They make tinnitus worse. Keep busy and try to focus energies and attention outwards and away from tinnitus. Sports, hobbies, yoga and tai chi can all help take a person's mind off the problem. Stress and fatigue only undermine a person's ability to cope.
3. **Medications.** It is essential that the doctor be informed of a patient's tinnitus. Some common medicines cause tinnitus as a side effect or make tinnitus worse.
4. **Caffeine.** Reduce intake of coffee, tea, Coca-Cola and chocolate as it temporarily worsens tinnitus for some people. Avoid quinine as in tonic water. Smoking narrows the blood vessels that supply vital oxygen to a person's ears and sensory cells. Quit smoking!

Having tinnitus does not mean a person is going deaf. Sometimes tinnitus is present with normal hearing for no discernible reason. Tinnitus should be treated as a warning signal—protect yourself against excessive noise and see a doctor.

Adapted from information provided by the Australian Tinnitus Association.