

Stress and tinnitus

This factsheet tells you about the link between stress and tinnitus (noise in the ear(s) or head). It explains what can help to keep stress at bay and what products, activities and therapies can help with tinnitus – to minimise the impact that stress and tinnitus can have.

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Medical disclaimer

The information given in this factsheet is not medical advice and, by providing it, neither Action on Hearing Loss nor our audiology specialists undertake any responsibility for your medical care, or accept you as a patient. Before acting on any of the information contained in this factsheet, or deciding on a course of treatment, you should discuss the matter with your GP (family doctor) or other medical professional who is treating you.

What is tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the name for sounds that some people hear in their ear(s) or head that don't have an outside source. It is not a disease or an illness – it's usually a symptom of a problem within the hearing system.

Tinnitus is common, affecting around 10% of adults in the UK – and many children.

Research has shown that tinnitus can be linked to several things, including:

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


However, sometimes there is no recognisable link. The exact cause of tinnitus is not yet fully understood and research is ongoing.

 See our factsheet *Tinnitus – causes and therapies*.

What does tinnitus sound like?

Tinnitus is usually experienced 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).

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


How does tinnitus affect people?

Everyone reacts to tinnitus in their own way. Most people who have tinnitus are not troubled by it. Some, however, find that it intrudes on their everyday life, and, in some cases, this can lead to stress, sleep problems, anxiety and depression.

Is there a cure for tinnitus?

While there are different therapies that can help people to manage their tinnitus, currently there are no safe and effective cures to silence it. Our tinnitus research aims to better understand how tinnitus starts and progresses, so this knowledge can be used to develop a range of cures ([see page 10](#)).

The good news is that, in most cases, tinnitus improves slowly over time by a process called 'habituation'. This is where the brain starts to adapt to tinnitus and pay less attention to it – the person with tinnitus will reach a point where they are no longer overly aware of their tinnitus and do not find it bothersome. Habituation is the ultimate aim of tinnitus therapies.

 See our factsheet *Tinnitus – causes and therapies* to find out more.

What is stress?

Stress is the feeling of being under too much pressure. It's usually caused by change or upset in daily life, and by lack of control over what is happening.

Most people experience stress at some point. It can be triggered by events such as:

- difficulties at work
- unemployment
- relationship problems

- bereavement
- illness – your own, or a relative or friend's
- money problems.

While good in small doses (the adrenaline it produces can help you to stay focused under pressure and even save your life in an emergency), prolonged stress can leave you feeling overwhelmed, tense and unable to cope. If left untreated, severe stress may lead to depression, anxiety or other mental health problems.

What are the signs of stress?

People are affected by stress in different ways. Some possible signs to look out for include:

- feeling tense
- quickened heartbeat
- disrupted sleep
- sweating
- loss of appetite
- difficulty concentrating
- feeling anxious, worried or irritable
- headaches
- muscle tension or pain
- dizziness.

What is the link between stress and tinnitus?

Research shows that there is a strong link between tinnitus and stress.

Can stress cause or worsen tinnitus?

There is no conclusive evidence that stress *causes* tinnitus. However, there is evidence to support the idea that, for a substantial number of people, tinnitus *follows or coincides with* a period of stress.

It's also known that stress can sometimes worsen existing tinnitus. So when you worry about tinnitus, you focus your attention on it and a vicious cycle arises: stress makes tinnitus worse, which, in turn, leads to greater stress.

Does tinnitus cause stress?

Tinnitus may cause you 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.

If you find yourself in this cycle, don't worry, there are many things you can do to break out of it and reduce the impact that tinnitus has on your life. A good place to start is to learn how to relax and control your responses to stress.

How can I learn to relax?

Many people learn to manage their stress levels without using conventional drugs and by using a combination of relaxation exercises, counselling and complementary therapies. If you are patient and gentle with yourself, and those around you, you'll soon benefit.

Relaxation exercises


Relaxation exercises can help to relieve tension in your body. They usually involve deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and rhythmic exercises. They can be done anywhere at any time.

You can learn relaxation exercises from books, CDs, DVDs, apps (software applications for smartphones and tablet devices) or relaxation classes, which are taught in many tinnitus clinics and audiology departments. You could also try a local adult education course in relaxation techniques, yoga or mindfulness (see below).

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a simple form of meditation that involves paying more attention to the present moment – to your own thoughts and feelings, and the world around you. It can help you to be aware of what is happening to you without judging it or fighting it. When looking at mindfulness and tinnitus, we don't expect it to change the nature of the tinnitus, but it may help to change the relationship you have with it.

Mindfulness may also help you notice signs of stress or anxiety earlier, and help you deal with them better.

 Find out more on the NHS Choices website: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx

Counselling

Counselling allows you to explore difficulties in your life, so it can help if you have tinnitus and want to talk about it. Being able to talk to someone who will listen and show understanding can be comforting. It can help to relieve your fears and, therefore, reduce your stress and anxiety levels. You may be recommended for medical counselling, which will be delivered by someone with a specialist understanding of tinnitus. If you think you would benefit from counselling, speak to your GP (or your tinnitus specialist) about getting a referral.

Complementary therapies

Complementary and alternative therapies fall outside of mainstream healthcare. Complementary therapies are usually used alongside conventional treatments, and alternative therapies are used instead of a mainstream treatment – but there can be some overlap between the two.

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.

The availability of complementary and alternative therapies on the NHS is limited and in most cases the NHS will not offer such treatments. However, do speak to your GP first if you are thinking of trying one.

Complementary therapies include:

- acupuncture
- chiropractic
- herbal medicine
- homeopathy
- osteopathy.

Osteopathy and chiropractic are regulated in the same way as conventional medicine. There is no professional statutory regulation of other complementary or alternative therapies, but professional bodies and voluntary registers can help you find therapists with certain qualifications, who agree to practise to a certain standard. The NHS Choices website (see below) provides more information.

Note: Herbal medicines may cause side effects such as headaches and stomach upsets. It's important to take things in moderation, as large doses of vitamin and mineral supplements have been shown to have negative health effects.

 You can find out more about complementary and alternative therapies, and where to find therapists, on the NHS Choices website: www.nhs.uk/Livewell/complementary-alternative-medicine/Pages/complementary-alternative-medicines.aspx

The benefits of relaxation

When you are relaxing, the following changes take place:

Physically, your muscles let go of tension so that toxins can be cleared from your bloodstream. Your breathing becomes more even. Your blood pressure drops and your heart beats more regularly and slowly. Other organs, including the brain, slow down their activity.

Mentally, you decrease your response to any type of symptom, including tinnitus. Concentration and decision-making become easier because you are mentally refreshed.

Emotionally, you feel 'quieter', calmer and more confident because it doesn't take so much effort to cope with things. You feel able to take life as it comes without overreacting. After a period of relaxation, many people find that they can get things back into perspective. Difficulties that you previously perceived as huge can shrink back to their right proportions.

Can medication help?

Although there are no drugs to treat tinnitus, if you feel that you need a little extra help to reduce anxiety or depression, your GP may prescribe sedatives, tranquilisers or anti-depressants. However, it is important to note that these are not directly prescribed as a treatment for tinnitus.

Sedatives have a calming effect and can help you to sleep. They may also help you feel less anxious.

Tranquilisers are helpful in reducing anxiety.

Anti-depressants are mainly prescribed for improving mood and treating depression. They can also reduce anxiety and help you to sleep.

Sedatives and tranquilisers may be prescribed for a short time to help you through a difficult period, or for a longer period, depending on your needs. Typically, anti-depressants need to be taken over a longer period before they start to have an effect.

Warning: Tranquilisers and sedatives can be extremely dangerous when mixed with other drugs, including alcohol. Tranquilisers can also be addictive. It is very important that you talk to your GP about any side effects these drugs might have before you take them.

Can eating well and being active help to reduce stress?

Yes, a well-balanced diet and regular physical activity – including non-strenuous activities such as walking and gardening – can help your overall wellbeing and give you a more positive outlook.

Your GP can give you advice about what physical activities may benefit you and how you can improve your diet. You can also find lots of useful information on the NHS Choices website – visit www.nhs.uk and go to the ‘Live Well’ section.

It was previously thought that caffeine was a contributing factor to tinnitus, and some people found that reducing their caffeine intake helped their tinnitus and their sleep. But recent research has shown that reducing caffeine intake does not reduce tinnitus, and that any benefits from doing this are coincidental.

How does tinnitus affect sleep?

Tinnitus can affect sleep but does not always do so. Some people with tinnitus may experience sleep disturbances. Worrying about tinnitus, or about not getting enough sleep, can have an impact on sleep. However, many people with tinnitus do sleep well.

You may be more aware of your tinnitus in a quiet environment – including when you’re in bed and when you take your hearing aids out (if you use them) – as your tinnitus isn’t masked by other sounds.

It’s very unlikely that tinnitus will wake you up, but it could be the first thing that you are aware of when you wake up naturally. This can make you think that your tinnitus woke you.

Sleep patterns do change with age – you may have noticed this. Generally, as you grow older:

- you need less sleep at night
- you wake up more frequently during the night
- your sleep becomes lighter and more fragmented, so you may nap during the day.

Most people get seven to eight hours of sleep a night, but this can vary. If you are concerned about your general sleeping pattern, speak to your GP.

What can help me get a good night’s sleep?

There are many things you can do to try to improve your sleeping pattern – and the quality of your sleep. It may take a bit of time for you to see what works for you, and to get used to a new routine, but hopefully you’ll soon notice the benefits.

12 tips for sleeping well

- **Get up at the same time each day** – even at weekends. Try not to nap in the day or catch up on lost sleep, as this won't improve your sleeping pattern.
- **Take daily exercise** – such as 30 minutes of walking, gardening or cycling. Exercise at least four hours before you go to bed to allow your body to cool down.
- **Reduce your intake of nicotine and caffeine** – both are stimulants that can keep you awake. Stop drinking caffeinated drinks four hours before bed.
- **Avoid drinking too much alcohol** – it may help you get to sleep initially, but it may cause you to wake sooner, once the effects have worn off, and stop you getting back to sleep.
- **Avoid over-the-counter medicines** – these may have a similar effect to alcohol. You may find herbal remedies and natural healthcare products help.
- **Try relaxation exercises** – these can be extremely helpful ([see page 4](#)). Practise during the day and find a short exercise to try when you are in bed.
- **Clear your mind before bedtime** – if you have particular worries, set aside around half an hour earlier in the evening to think about how to resolve your problems. Write your ideas down. Try not to think about them as you're trying to get to sleep.
- **Introduce gentle sound into your environment** – this can help you to relax and distract you from your tinnitus. You could use an electric fan, soft music or a clock with a prominent tick. Or you could try a sound product specifically developed for people with tinnitus ([see page 9](#)).
- **'Wind down' at least an hour before bed** – have a warm bath or listen to relaxing music. Try to read, watch TV or surf the internet earlier in the evening. This helps to draw a line between daytime and bedtime and will help you get ready for sleep.
- **Don't eat just before bed or during the night** – eating will boost your energy levels and may make you more alert, which can increase your awareness of tinnitus. Do make sure, however, that you've eaten enough earlier in the evening, as hunger can keep you awake.
- **Switch the light off as soon as you go to bed** – tell yourself that sleep will come and don't 'try hard' to go to sleep; resting in bed can be just as helpful.
- **Think about room temperature and the bedding you use** – if you're too hot or too cold in your bed, you're more likely to wake up during the night.

What products can help?

Many people are more aware of their tinnitus in a quiet environment. Sound therapy (or 'sound enrichment') works by filling the silence with sounds that distract you from listening to your tinnitus. Over time, this can help with the habituation process – where you 'train' your brain to 'filter out' tinnitus, so you're less aware of it.

There's a wide range of sound-therapy products available:

- **Bedside and desktop sound generators** – often known as 'tinnitus relaxers', these play a range of environmental and soothing sounds. Some are designed for use at night, and some come with a variety of extra features, such as aromatherapy fragrances and coloured lights.
- **CDs or albums that you can download**, which play relaxing sounds such as birdsong or rainfall.
- **Sound pillows** (normal pillows with speakers inside) and **pillow speakers**, which you can connect to your tinnitus relaxer or music player. They let you listen to sounds in bed without disturbing your partner (if you have one), and without the discomfort of earphones or headphones.
- **Behind-the-ear sound generators** – these look a bit like hearing aids and produce a soft 'rushing' noise.
- **In-the-ear sound generators** – these small devices are designed to sit inside the ear canal and produce a soft 'rushing' noise. They don't contain as many functions as modern behind-the-ear sound generators and are being used less frequently.
- **Combination devices** – these are designed for people with both tinnitus and hearing loss – they contain a hearing aid and a sound generator.
- **Tinnitus apps** – there are now many apps available for smartphones and tablet devices that are designed to help with tinnitus. They have a range of sounds to choose from, and some apps allow you to customise sounds for your needs.

Your audiology department may be able to provide you with sound-therapy products if they're suitable. The type of product you may be offered will depend on what's available from your NHS service what's most suitable for your needs.


You can also buy tinnitus products from private tinnitus services and online stores such as the Action on Hearing Loss shop: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop

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 other **Tinnitus** factsheets are:

- *Tinnitus – causes and therapies*
- *Pulsatile tinnitus*
- *Musical hallucinations*
- *How to help friends and family with tinnitus.*

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 local tinnitus support groups across the UK, has a range of publications and produces a 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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