

Constant Ringing in Your Ears? Hearing Aids Offer Hope



(ARA) – If it seems like your ears ring constantly, it's probably not your imagination or the economy . . . and you're not alone. You may have tinnitus, an inner ear ailment that affects between 25 million to 50 million Americans -- with about 12 million people experiencing such severe symptoms it affects their daily lives.

The good news is treatment, including hearing aids, can offer relief to some suffering the persistent ringing, buzzing or humming associated with tinnitus, says the Better Hearing Institute.

Tinnitus can be intermittent or constant. Causes range from ear infections and over-exposure to extremely loud noises, to underlying health problems like allergies or heart and blood pressure problems. Often, sufferers are unable to pinpoint the cause of their tinnitus.

"Tinnitus can have a direct impact on a person's emotional well being," says Dr. Sergei Kochkin, BHI's executive director. "Not only can their hearing be affected but also their ability to sleep and to concentrate."

Kochkin and Dr. Richard Tyler, a professor in the University of Iowa's otolaryngology and communication sciences and disorders departments and editor of The Consumer Handbook on Tinnitus (Auricle Ink, 2008), published an article in the December 2008 Hearing Review on their survey of 230 hearing health professionals in the United States and Canada. Their survey found that six out of 10 patients reported some tinnitus relief when using hearing aids and two out of 10 reported major relief.

The symptoms of tinnitus "influence basic life functions such as socialization and relaxation," the duo wrote. "In severe cases it can interfere with the individual's ability to perform adequately on the job, or contribute to psychological disorders such as depression, suicide ideation, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and anger."

Although tinnitus is actually common and can cause major life disruptions, the number of sufferers who seek treatment for the problem is relatively small. One reason may be that they mistakenly believe their condition is untreatable. Unfortunately, many doctors are also unaware of the latest treatment option, BHI says. Patients may think they simply have to learn to live with the noise.

"No one should ever ignore persistent tinnitus," Kochkin says. "Not only is every individual entitled to a chance to regain his or her quality of life, but in rare cases tinnitus also can be a symptom of a more serious health issue that could demand medical intervention. What's more, nearly everyone with tinnitus has hearing loss as well."

In a recent large-scale survey by the Better Hearing Institute of the American hearing-impaired population, 39 percent (more than 9 million adult Americans) indicated they had not sought help for their hearing loss specifically because they also had tinnitus. “Research shows that untreated hearing loss has its own negative social, psychological, cognitive and health effects on the individual suffering from it,” Kochkin adds. “So the individual with both untreated tinnitus and untreated hearing loss suffers an even more diminished quality of life than individuals with just tinnitus or just hearing loss.”

While hearing aids are not a cure for tinnitus, they may be able to help tinnitus patients by:

- Improving communication and reducing stress, which makes it easier to cope with the condition.
- Amplifying background sounds, which can make tinnitus seem less loud and prominent.

A new type of hearing aid, called the open fit hearing aid, may be particularly useful in alleviating tinnitus. The open fit hearing aid can reduce the effects of the tinnitus ringing sensation while still allowing sounds from the outside to pass into the ear.

If you think you have tinnitus have your hearing evaluated by a hearing health professional and to explore the use of hearing aids to alleviate tinnitus. The American Academy of Otolaryngology (AAO-HNS) and the American Tinnitus Association recommends these additional tips for minimizing the effects of tinnitus on your health:

- Avoid exposure to loud sounds and noises.
- Get your blood pressure checked. If it is high, get your doctor’s help to control it.
- Decrease your intake of salt. Salt impairs blood circulation.
- Avoid stimulants such as coffee, tea, cola, and tobacco.
- Exercise daily to improve your circulation.
- Get adequate rest and avoid fatigue.
- Eliminate or reduce some stress in different parts of your life; stress often makes tinnitus worse.
- Experiment by eliminating other possible sources of tinnitus aggravation, e.g. artificial sweeteners, sugar, alcohol, prescription or over-the-counter medications. *(Do not stop taking medications without consulting with your health care professional about the possible ototoxic impact of your medications.)*

Furthermore the Better Hearing Institute recommends that in addition to the practical tips above (which apply to a healthy lifestyle for all people) that people with tinnitus may receive benefit by simply understanding the causes, myths and facts about tinnitus through either counseling or self-help books. “We believe that if hearing health professionals can provide effective treatment for tinnitus, they also can be instrumental

in motivating people to concurrently treat their hearing loss,” Kochkin says. “This would have a double impact in improving the quality of life for millions of Americans.”

To learn more, visit www.betterhearing.org or call the Better Hearing Institute hotline at (800) EAR-WELL (800-327-9355).

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Editor’s Note:

Founded in 1973, The Better Hearing Institute (BHI) conducts research and engages in hearing health education with the goal of helping people with hearing loss to benefit from proper treatment.

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