

Hearing aids offer hope for people who suffer from tinnitus

Hearing aids can offer hope of better hearing for people who suffer from tinnitus, according to a recent survey conducted by the non-profit educational organization Better Hearing Institute (BHI). The survey of 230 hearing health professionals in the United States and Canada found that six out of ten patients reported some relief of their tinnitus when using hearing aids and two of ten reported major relief.

These findings are particularly significant in light of past BHI research that found that nearly 9 million American adults with hearing loss have not sought a solution to their hearing problem simply because they also have tinnitus and mistakenly believe that nothing can be done about it.

Tinnitus is a persistent ringing, buzzing, or humming in one or both ears that has no external source. It can be intermittent or constant, but for many who suffer from it, tinnitus is so intrusive that it has a debilitating effect on their quality of life. Some 50 million Americans suffer from tinnitus, and for 1.2 million the problem is so severe that it affects their everyday lives.

"Tinnitus can have a direct impact on a person's emotional well being. Not only their hearing can be affected but also their ability to sleep and to concentrate," according to Sergei Kochkin, PhD, BHI's executive director, and Richard Tyler, PhD, professor in both the Department of Otolaryngology - Head & Neck Surgery and the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Iowa as well as recent editor of *The Consumer Handbook on Tinnitus* (Auricle Ink, 2008). They published an article on the tinnitus survey findings in the December 2008 *Hearing Review*.

The symptoms of tinnitus "influence basic life functions such as socialization and relaxation," they said. "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."

Despite the high prevalence of tinnitus and the disruption it can cause, only a small number of sufferers contact their physicians or an audiologist for help. One reason is they mistakenly believe tinnitus is untreatable. Many physicians, who are not well-educated on tinnitus or on the latest treatment options, com-

found the problem by inappropriately telling their patients who complain of tinnitus to just go home and learn to live with it.

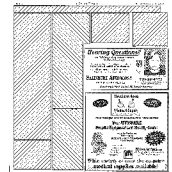
"No one should ever ignore persistent tinnitus," Kochkin said. "Not only is every individual entitled to a chance to regain their quality of life, but in rare cases tinnitus also can be a symptom of a more serious health issue that could demand medical intervention. What's more, nearly everyone with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

In a recent large-scale survey by the BHI of the U.S. hearing-impaired population, who had neglected their hearing loss, 39% indicated they had not sought help for their hearing loss specifically because they concurrently 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 added. "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."

Experts believe that hearing aids can help tinnitus by improving communication and reducing stress, thereby making it easier to accept or cope with the condition. What's more, by amplifying background sound or producing background ambient noise, hearing aids are believed to reduce the loudness or prominence of tinnitus. A new type of hearing aid, called the open-fit hearing aid, may be designed to 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.

There are two main types of tinnitus: middle ear and sensorineural. Middle ear tinnitus is transmitted through the middle ear cavity, and can often be heard only by the examiner. Sensorineural tinnitus originates in the auditory sensory or neural system. Tinnitus is most frequently caused by exposure to loud noises, an injury to the head or ear, the use of certain medications, or it



develops as a natural part of the aging process. Many causes of tinnitus remain unknown, however.

In addition to being evaluated by a hearing health professional to explore the use of hearing aids to alleviate tinnitus, the American Academy of Otolaryngology (AAO-HNS) recommends these additional tips for minimizing tinnitus:

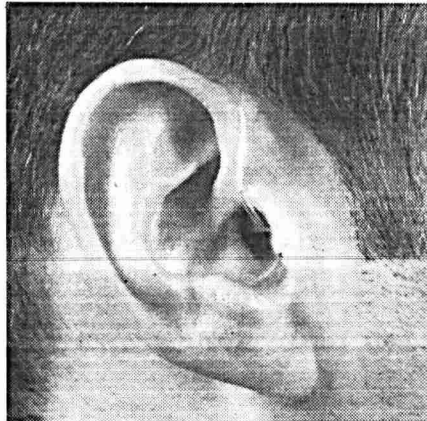
- Avoid exposure to loud sounds and noises.
 - Get your blood pressure checked. If it is high, get your doctor's help to control it.
 - Decrease your intake of salt. Salt impairs blood circulation.
 - Avoid stimulants such as coffee, tea, cola, and tobacco.
 - Exercise daily to improve your circulation.
- Get adequate rest and avoid fatigue.

"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 said. "This would have a double impact in improving the quality of life for millions of Americans."

Submitted by Dr. April Pittman, Audiologist. Please contact Dr. Pittman at 704-633-6775 if you have further questions about hearing loss and tinnitus or to set up an appointment to discuss your hearing needs.

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