

TINNITUS: *The latest way to treat it (and not to)*

Tinnitus — that ringing, humming, whooshing, or buzzing in the ears that only the individual can hear — is an old problem, but a new technique uses your smartphone and Bluetooth technology to solve it.

Finding a solution is important because, while tinnitus isn't painful, sufferers know it can make it difficult to hear and even sleep. And the effects tend to get worse when your surroundings are quiet.

Nearly 50 million Americans suffer from varying degrees of tinnitus, says the American Tinnitus Association, yet doctors are still researching exactly how tinnitus occurs.

"They don't exactly know why, which makes it hard to treat," explains Dr. Gregory King, a doctor of audiology at Clifton Springs Hearing Center.

So the idea that tinnitus can be treated easily with a pill or therapy is one of its biggest myths, says King. A pill or supplement won't affect the perception of sound.

But it is clear that while many things can cause tinnitus — including fluid in the ear, head trauma or whiplash — by far the most common cause is excessive noise exposure. In 90 percent of cases, tinnitus is accompanied by hearing loss, says the Hearing Health Foundation.

The chronic form of tinnitus is more common in adults over age 40, though acute or temporary cases can happen at any age, says King. Given the rising average age of the population, the incidence of tinnitus is likely to grow.

Another myth is that tinnitus is a sign of some underlying condition. It's not, says King. "It's rare that tinnitus is a symptom of something bigger, such as a tumor."

In most people, it's a side effect of aging and natural hearing loss.

There's no magic cure that will immediately eliminate tinnitus, says King, but there are ways to help people manage and live with it. The most common include cognitive therapy and acupuncture. But the latest is a high-tech solution.

King says, "We've found the most success with amplification hearing devices," which improve hearing by using a masking technique to help minimize the annoyance factor associated with buzzing and ringing.

These devices are similar to glasses in that they're worn to change how sound is experienced. By masking or covering up the ringing, other sounds — someone talking, music playing — can be heard more easily.

It works a lot like the white noise machine you may have on your bedside table to help you sleep. Sound files, downloaded to a smartphone, can be piped into the hearing devices using Bluetooth technology.

The sound masks any ringing or whooshing in the ear. The sounds and signals can be adjusted, to find what works most effectively, says King.

"The bottom line is that there is help for people who have tinnitus," says King. "People don't have to live with it if they don't want to because we now have technology that can help alleviate it."



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