

When an Inner Sound is Maddening

Tinnitus: a Constant, Unwelcome Companion

By Paula S. McCarron

Life changing is how 78-year-old Virginia Lipp describes the night she attended an opera where gun shots were fired as part of the program. That night, 37 years ago, is when Lipp says her problems began with tinnitus, a maddening and often ever-present condition commonly described as a ringing in the ears.

"It is salient that in one evening of gun shots during an opera, my whole life changed drastically," recalls Lipp, of Tyler, Texas. "No longer was I the soprano soloist at my church, no longer the featured vocalist in plays at our playhouse, no longer able to shop for groceries, no longer could I go to a church service with musical instruments."

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— Dr. Michael Seidman, Detroit hearing specialist.

"Take a high pitched hairdryer, turn it on, strap it to your head, and never take it off. That's how my wife describes it," says Gary Reul, chief executive officer for the American Tinnitus Association.

Both Reul and his wife suffer from tinnitus. Reul says, "My tinnitus started 16 years ago. I stepped on an airboat in Florida and when I got off the boat, I had it. It was so bad. I was like a caged animal that night back at the hotel."

The Many Forms of Tinnitus

Tinnitus often afflicts the elderly, affecting 12% of men and 7% of women over age 65. It can be an occasional problem or a persistent cause of suffering. There is no cure for tinnitus. And while tinnitus is often described as a ringing sound, it is also described as a buzzing, roaring, hissing, clicking, roaring, whistling, or whooshing sound. The volume of that sound can range from barely perceptible to debilitating.

"Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease," says Dr. Michael Seidman, an ear, nose and throat specialist with Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. "And at this point, there is no cure for it."

"Tinnitus is a direct result of hearing loss," adds Dr. Craig



Kasper, an audiologist in the New York City area. "When the hair cells in the ear are damaged, there is hearing loss. And we now know there is a brain-ear connection."

"It's estimated that two million people can't sleep and can't work due to the severity of their tinnitus," notes Reul. "I've been able to get my tinnitus down to a manageable level, but right now, it's pretty severe. A diabetic medicine seems to have turned it back on and an antibiotic I recently took made it worse."

Some Progress, Some Mystery

Through use of brain scanning equipment, researchers are learning that the areas of the brain which are responsible for the interpretation of sound are also responsible for the creation of fearful emotion that can be associated with tinnitus.

Kasper says, "Hearing loss deprives the brain of sound, and that deprivation causes the brain to undergo change," says Kasper. "Theoretically, everyone has some degree of tinnitus, but the question is: Why are some people bothered by it and some are not?"

Tinnitus can be triggered by any number of issues: exposure to loud noise, earwax blockage, changes in ear bones, certain medications, head or neck injuries, inner ear disorder, blood vessel disorders, acoustic neuroma (a non-cancerous tumor) or high blood pressure.

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How Sufferers Cope

Options for treating tinnitus range from lifestyle changes to surgery. Some people find that changes in diet, nutritional supplements, and elimination of caffeine and nicotine are effective. Others turn to anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medications and/or counseling. Some utilize hearing aids or "maskers," devices that soften but do not eliminate the sounds created by tinnitus. And there are some people who have undergone surgery known as deep brain stimulation, where electrodes are placed into the brain.

"I had a year of hypnosis from a very good clinical psychologist in Houston, who fought with me tooth and nail to put the fight back into me," says Virginia Lipp. "When we lose our ability to fight, we're sunk. We fight to wake up, we fight to keep

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appointments on time, we fight to make deadlines—and we need that ability to fight to live with tinnitus.”

So where does one’s “fight” begin?

“I don’t see anyone who hasn’t first been seen by an ENT (ear, nose and throat) specialist,” says Anne Howell, an audiologist at the Callier Center for Communication Disorders at the University of Texas, Dallas. “The people who come to see me usually are having significant life issues as a result of their tinnitus. They are losing sleep, experiencing social avoidance, or having increased periods of fatigue. The tinnitus is impacting their ability to function on a very significant level.”

Insurance Too Often Lacking

Howell acknowledges one of the biggest challenges in getting treatment for tinnitus is the lack of insurance coverage for services related to hearing loss, tinnitus or other hearing related problems. She says that medications such as anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications and sleep aids are often suggested as the medication is covered by insurance where other approaches used in tinnitus treatment are not.

Out-of-pocket expense for hearing aids, re-training therapy or special devices that provide auditory stimulation can cost

between \$2,000 and \$6,000.

Medicare, and even private health plans, rarely cover a complete audiology exam, which can take up to four hours to conduct. However, veterans with tinnitus are more likely to be helped, as the military considers tinnitus to be a disability. In fact, it’s estimated that more than \$1 billion will be paid in benefits by the year 2011 for veterans who have been diagnosed with

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RESOURCES:

American Tinnitus Association (www.ata.org and 800-634-8978), a non-profit educational organization offering information and resources, including “Twenty Tips to Manage Tinnitus” (www.ata.org/tinnitus-tips)

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (301-496-7243) has comprehensive online information covering everything from hearing loss to treatments to current research at www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/noiseinear.asp

Mayo Clinic has an excellent primer on the issue, symptoms, treatment and causes of tinnitus at www.mayoclinic.com/health/tinnitus/DS00365inic

Oregon Health and Science University has a useful fact sheet about tinnitus as well as treatment options at www.ohsu.edu/ohrc/tinnitusclinic/factSheet.html