



TINNITUS

Tinnitus or "ringing in the ears" is a very common condition. It is the sensation of an abnormal sound in one or both ears. The sound can be constant, can occur at only specific times, or even coincide with the heartbeat. It can be of any pitch or intensity. It can sound like a natural or man-made sound. Sometimes tinnitus can be so distressing to the patient that it interferes with daily activities or sleep.

The external ear collects sound and channels it down the ear canal. Sound energy then causes the eardrum and its attached three hearing bones to vibrate. These hearing bones are called the malleus, incus and stapes. The stapes acts like a small piston and causes vibrations in the inner ear. The inner ear is filled with fluid. When this fluid moves, it stimulates the hearing nerve, which follows the internal ear canal to the brain. Anything that interferes with this process can cause tinnitus.

Tinnitus is usually due to a problem in the inner ear, most commonly a sensorineural hearing loss. It can also be secondary to medications, especially aspirin. Caffeine, nicotine, chocolate, salt and nutrasweet all cause changes in the inner ear fluid balance resulting in tinnitus. Other contributing medical conditions include diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, thyroid disease, or carotid artery stenosis. Rarer causes of tinnitus include abnormal blood vessels or benign growths in the middle ear, inner ear or brain. The treatment of tinnitus first involves performing a complete history, physical examination and hearing test. At times it may be necessary to perform other tests such as an ABR test or MRI scan. Changing dietary habits usually will improve the tinnitus significantly. Hearing aids or relaxation tapes can also help. Unfortunately, there is no one medication that is helpful in treating all the various causes of tinnitus.