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Tinnitus

To nearly 36 million people it's not music to their ears that keeps them up nights and disturbs them during the day, it's an annoying ringing. If you suffer from this affliction the following advice from the American academy of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery may help.

What are these annoying noises? Are they unusual?

Although tinnitus, the name for head noises, is very common, the degree of severity differs from patient to patient. Noise can vary from a low roar to a high squeal, from one or both ears, from intermittent to continuous distraction. More than seven million people are so severely affected that they cannot lead normal lives.

What causes tinnitus?

Although most causes are not serious, trouble with the hearing nerve (which could stem from excessive exposure to loud noises and the aging process itself) is probably the most common cause of subjective tinnitus. The hearing loss can range from mild, almost undetectable, to severe and profound.

Often there is no identifiable cause for tinnitus. If this is true, can anything be done to lessen the noise?

Since the auditory system is part of the general nervous system, its responses are affected to some degree by anxiety. Therefore it is important to: get adequate rest; avoid caffeine and nicotine; decrease salt intake; exercise daily; and explore the applications of biofeedback (relaxation and concentration exercises). Tinnitus is often increased by use of common medications such as aspirin and Quinine. This enhancement of tinnitus is immediately reversed on stopping the medication. Since tinnitus is usually more bothersome when surroundings are quiet, a competing sound (such as a ticking clock or a radio) may help mask the head noises. This is especially helpful when trying to sleep at night. Some people get relief from a small electronic instrument built into a hearing aid. This "tinnitus masker" generates a competitive but pleasant sound. Other people find the hearing aid alone reduces the noise and occasionally causes it to go away. Many folk remedies have been tried for the treatment of tinnitus, but none has proven successful for everyone. Currently some people are finding relief taking various herbal remedies found in health food stores. Though the symptom can be quite annoying when first noticed, it tends to reduce in time, especially as anxiety over its cause is removed.

Prior to any treatment of tinnitus or head noise, it is important to have a thorough examination which includes an evaluation by your otolaryngologist. This evaluation should include a complete ear, nose and throat exam and an audiogram. Once potentially harmful causes of hearing loss and tinnitus as have been ruled out, you can search for simple ways to adjust to the problem.