

What is that Ringing Sound?

Have you ever heard a buzzing sound or a ringing that no one around you could hear?

Tinnitus, a hearing condition characterized by the perception of sounds like hissing, buzzing, or clicking in the ears, is experienced by more 15% of people in the United States. But this extremely common condition is also widely misunderstood.

“Most people don’t even know what tinnitus is until they experience it, so they may not be aware of the risk factors,” says Dr. Tricia Scaglione, Au.D., Director of the UHealth Tinnitus Program. “Also, many patients with tinnitus don’t realize that they can do something about it if they get it. They are often led to believe that they have to live with it. This is not the case.”

Loud noise may be the culprit

Many cases of tinnitus are the result of damage to the ears from exposure to loud noises. Usually, when people consider this risk, they are thinking about rock concerts, car races, and noises from power tools or firearms. The risks of tinnitus can arise in unexpected places, as well, Dr. Scaglione says.



“I’ve had more than one patient who began experiencing tinnitus after a bat mitzvah,” she says. “Other potential risks include loud house parties, nightclubs, and lawn and garden tools that you use for yard work.”

Dr. Scaglione says the best way to protect yourself in these situations is with the right hearing protection. For yard work, have a pair of hearing-protective earmuffs in your garage along with your other lawn and garden equipment. You can easily take foam earplugs along in your purse or pocket for concerts and clubs or visit an audiologist for custom earplugs that can better fit your ears or fill your specific needs.

When it comes to more everyday situations like family gatherings or celebrations, Dr. Brianna Kuzbyt, Au.D., audiologist, says the best approach is to have a plan.

“You should plan your hearing protection strategy just as you would plan to avoid other illnesses,” she says. “For example, if you’re in a room with loud noises or music, move as far away from the speakers as possible, or take a break occasionally to go to a quiet area in the building.”

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) also says that many non-noise factors can put you at risk for tinnitus, as well.

These include:

- Stress
- High blood pressure
- Migraines
- Head injuries
- Caffeine
- Smoking
- Ear wax
- Certain medications or medical conditions

There are treatments for tinnitus

Some think that once you have tinnitus, there's nothing you can do about it. This is not true, the doctors say. There are several management options that can make life easier for individuals with tinnitus.

"Tinnitus education can help demystify the condition and help people manage it better," says Dr. Scaglione. "Sound enrichment can be helpful — many different options are available from simple tabletop devices to devices that you wear directly on your ears. There are even sound apps for your phone that help to distract from the tinnitus and can also help with managing stress, which is often a tinnitus trigger."

It's essential to see a doctor who is familiar with tinnitus and can provide the right treatment strategies, says Dr. Kuzbyt. If your doctor doesn't have a lot of experience with tinnitus, you can ask for a referral to an audiologist. Even then, she says that you may want to do your homework and see if someone at the audiologist's office is a tinnitus specialist.

If left untreated, bothersome tinnitus can have mental health implications for many patients and can even lead to social withdrawal and depression. That's why education and treatment are so crucial.

With the right care, tinnitus can be managed. See your health care provider if you notice any signs and symptoms.

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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