

Our friendly helpline team is waiting  
to answer your call or email.

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**ACTION ON**  
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## **Therapies to help with your tinnitus**

# **THE FACTS**

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# Therapies to help with your tinnitus

This factsheet is part of our **tinnitus** range. It is written for people who have tinnitus, their families, friends and the professionals who work with them.

Tinnitus is a medical term to describe noises that people can hear in one ear, both ears or in the head – such as ringing, buzzing or whistling. The sounds heard can vary from person to person, but the common link is that they do not have an external source.

Read this factsheet to find out:

- People say ‘there’s nothing you can do about tinnitus’ – is that true?
- What is counselling?
- What does a clinical psychologist help with tinnitus?
- What is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)?
- What is tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT)?
- What are sound and noise generators?
- Can I use ordinary household equipment to help manage my tinnitus?
- Are there special CDs to help with tinnitus?
- Where can I buy products that may help?
- Where can I get further information?

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in Braille or in large print, please contact our helpline (see front page).

**Medical disclaimer:** the information given in this factsheet is not medical advice and by providing it neither Action on Hearing Loss nor our tinnitus and medical advisors undertake any responsibility for your medical care, nor accept you as a patient. Before acting on any of the information contained in this factsheet, or deciding on a course of treatment, you should discuss the matter with your GP (family doctor) or other medical professional who is treating you.

## People say ‘there’s nothing you can do about tinnitus’ – is that true?

Absolutely not. This is just one of the many myths surrounding tinnitus. One of the reasons this myth might have gained some acceptance is because, as yet, there is no single cure for tinnitus that suits everybody. Nevertheless, there are plenty of therapies to help you manage your tinnitus and reduce its impact on your life. This factsheet covers:

- counselling
- cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT)
- sound and noise generators
- ordinary household equipment

- special CDs.

With the right guidance and information, you should be able to find a therapy, or combination of therapies, that can help you manage your tinnitus.

## What is counselling?

There are many different definitions of counselling. One of the simplest is that counselling is a working relationship between you and a counsellor that allows you to explore difficulties in your life.

## Can counselling help me if I have tinnitus?

Yes. Being able to talk to somebody who will listen and show understanding can be comforting and reassuring. Your counsellor may also help you see how other things in your life can affect your tinnitus. There are several kinds of counselling available, all of which can help if you have tinnitus and want to talk about it:

- medical counselling
- private counselling
- lay counselling
- group counselling.

## Medical counselling

To talk to someone who has a specialist understanding of tinnitus, you really need medical counselling. Most medical counselling is delivered in specialist tinnitus clinics in hospitals. Your GP may refer you to your local ear, nose and throat (ENT) department initially. If the ENT specialist think it's appropriate, you may be referred to a tinnitus clinic. Tinnitus clinics are normally staffed by hearing therapists or specialised audiologists.

Successful medical counselling is based on knowing the nature and causes of tinnitus and how to manage it. If you have tinnitus, medical counselling can help in several ways by:

- Relieving your fears.
- Helping you understand your tinnitus, which can help you accept it.
- Showing you that tinnitus is a common complaint.
- Encouraging you to accept that most people eventually learn to live with their tinnitus, and ignore it.
- Showing you that your tinnitus can be managed quite effectively using simple techniques.

Medical counselling is an essential part of tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT), which tries to reduce tinnitus distress (see page 6).

NHS hospital tinnitus clinics may refer a person with tinnitus to a clinical psychologist. Some clinics may already have a clinical psychologist in their team for tinnitus management. Some private

healthcare providers also offer medical counselling services. More information about clinical psychologists can be found on pages 4 and 5.

### **Private counselling**

Private counselling involves talking to a counsellor who either practises independently, or through an agency such as a counselling centre. You usually have to pay and most counsellors will not have specialist knowledge about tinnitus.

Private counselling may be useful if aspects of your life are making you feel unhappy or anxious, such as bereavement or relationship difficulties. Stress can make your tinnitus seem worse, whereas talking about difficulties in your life can indirectly make your tinnitus seem better.

The experience and qualifications of counsellors can vary greatly, so make sure your counsellor is recognised by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (see page 10). You may be able to see an independent counsellor through the NHS. Some GPs employ counsellors on a sessional basis to work with their patients. Sessions may be free or offered at a reduced rate.

### **Lay counselling**

Lay counselling may be helpful if you have tinnitus. A lay counsellor is not a qualified counsellor, but may have undergone some counselling training, or have some personal knowledge or experience of tinnitus. They could be a member of a local tinnitus self-help group or work on a helpline. You may be able to work through your feelings about your tinnitus in different ways and receive practical and emotional support face-to-face or over the telephone.

### **Group sessions**

Sometimes, your therapist may suggest you participate in a group session. A group of you meets the therapist for a number of sessions. During these sessions, you are taught how to discover your hidden beliefs and how to challenge negative thoughts. The people in the group will have at least two things in common – they have tinnitus and they are upset by it.

## **How can clinical psychologists help with tinnitus?**

Although in certain cases your GP may be able to refer you directly to a clinical psychologist, normally it would be necessary for an ENT specialist to make the referral on the NHS.

### **What does a clinical psychologist do?**

Clinical psychologists work in healthcare or social care settings, including hospitals and health centres. They work with people with psychological problems such as anxiety or depression. They help people understand the causes and effects of their problems and reduce their distress.

You may be referred to a clinical psychologist if you are in a lot of distress because of your tinnitus. Psychologists help people with all types of problems and being referred to one does not mean that

you are in danger of 'going mad'. As well as assessing and giving therapy, clinical psychologists are often involved in research to find out if, and how well, different psychological therapies work. A clinical psychologist's role is different from that of a psychiatrist who has qualified in medicine and can prescribe drugs.

## **What treatment will be offered?**

The clinical psychologist may offer strategies to help you cope better with the effects of tinnitus.

These could include:

- Helping you recognise and assess how tinnitus is affecting you.
- Offering therapies to help with anxiety or depression.
- Using CBT – changing your thoughts and beliefs about tinnitus (see below).
- Suggesting relaxation and imagery exercises.
- Counselling.
- Hypnosis (see our factsheet **Tinnitus, sleep and complementary therapies**).
- Finding ways of improving your sleep and your social environment in order to reduce the negative effects of your tinnitus.

Some tinnitus clinics and hospitals use a clinical psychologist as part of a team approach to tinnitus management. The clinical psychologist may visit the tinnitus clinic and see you there, or you may be referred by the hospital to your local health authority's clinical psychology services. You may see a clinical psychologist on a one-to-one basis, or in group therapy sessions with other tinnitus patients.

## **What is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)?**

CBT examines your thought patterns, beliefs and the way you do things, in order to understand why you react in certain ways. Therapy may be provided on a one-to-one basis or in a group session. The professionals most likely to offer and use CBT are clinical psychologists or psychotherapists.

## **How can CBT help me if I have tinnitus?**

What you think about your tinnitus affects how you feel about it. The more attention you pay to your tinnitus, the worse you may feel. Although not designed as a tinnitus-specific treatment, CBT can help you in a number of ways:

- It can teach you coping techniques to deal with negative feelings and distress. Your thoughts and feelings can become more positive.
- By changing how you think about tinnitus and what you do about it, your distress is reduced, you start to tolerate the noises and they eventually become less noticeable.

## **What happens in a course of CBT?**

You are usually asked to keep a diary of the times that your tinnitus noises are most annoying or distressing, making a note of the nature of the distress and any thoughts that go with it. For example, you might write: 'Tonight I feel upset and scared about the cause of my tinnitus noises. I worry about

my health'. The therapist will help you look at the reasons behind your strong reactions to your tinnitus.

Your therapist will discuss your thoughts with you and suggest different ways of doing things. Throughout CBT, you are encouraged – and given help – to challenge your ways of thinking. A therapist will not try to force a set of beliefs on you, but will help you find the best way of approaching your tinnitus.

## What is tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT)?

TRT is based on the neurophysiological model of tinnitus developed in the late 1980s by Pawel Jastreboff and Jonathan Hazell. The neurophysiological model of tinnitus suggests that it is the limbic system – the subconscious part of the brain responsible for our emotions – that gives importance and meaning to the tinnitus signal. According to this model, we perceive the tinnitus signal to be a threat or a danger and this provokes an emotional response. Our awareness of tinnitus is heightened and so we perceive it to be louder or more persistent.

TRT is the term given to tinnitus treatment that combines counselling and low-level sound therapy. It does not work directly on your tinnitus, but on your awareness and understanding of it. In time, as your awareness of the sounds is reduced, you will only notice it when you focus on it. This is known as 'habituation' and is the ultimate goal of TRT. Results and their time-frame can vary from one person to another.

## How does TRT work?

TRT works through a combination of two main elements: counselling and sound therapy.

### Counselling

Counselling is a key part of TRT. In-depth explanations of how your hearing works will help you understand why you have tinnitus. Similarly, talking and learning about your hearing system can help you overcome your fears and make your tinnitus seem less threatening. This is all part of the habituation process.

### Sound therapy

Your tinnitus may seem louder in quiet environments; for example, at night. Sound therapy works to make tinnitus less noticeable by reducing the contrast between tinnitus sounds and background sounds. It also helps your hearing system become less sensitive to the tinnitus because it distracts the brain from listening to the tinnitus sounds. This 'distraction' can be achieved by wearing 'white noise' generators – these produce a soothing *shh* sound – and by using environmental sounds, for example, from CDs or table-top sound generators (see page next page).

If you have hearing loss, having a hearing aid fitted can help. The hearing aid will compensate for your hearing loss and provide sound therapy by making environmental sounds louder – which, in turn, can distract you from your tinnitus.

## What are sound and noise generators?

Sound and noise generators are devices that make soothing sounds to distract you from your tinnitus. They can therefore help you manage and live with tinnitus and hyperacusis (sensitivity to noise). Using sound in this way is sometimes known as ‘sound enrichment’ or ‘sound therapy’. Sound enrichment is a vital part of TRT (see page 6).

## What types of sound and noise generators are available?

Sound and noise generators developed specifically for people with tinnitus include:

- wearable noise generators
- bedside or desktop noise generators
- pillow speakers.

### Wearable noise generators

Wearable noise generators look like – and are worn like – hearing aids. There are several types available:

- In-the-canal (ITC) models that fit inside the ear canal.
- In-the-ear (ITE) models that sit at the entrance of the ear canal.
- Behind-the-ear (BTE) models that are worn behind the ear. Sound reaches the ear via a plastic tube and earmould.
- Combination instruments that are combined hearing aid and noise generators.
- A noise generator ‘shoe’, an attachment on certain models of a hearing aid, which makes a combination instrument.

Wearable noise generators have been known by various names in the past, including tinnitus maskers, white noise generators, wide band noise generators, retrainers or blockers. All produce a soothing *shh* sound known as white noise or pink noise. Pink noise is slightly richer and less shrill than white noise. Both types consist of a mix of high, middle and low sound frequencies.

Some specialists recommend wearing the generators for a few hours each day and at times when the tinnitus is particularly troublesome. Other specialists think that people who use noise generators should wear them all the time when they are awake.

If you wear the generators often, they will increase the chances of ‘habituation’ – the gradual process whereby, over time, you become less aware of your tinnitus and eventually only notice it when you consciously focus on it. Your audiologist should be able to provide you with further advice on whether or not one might be suitable for you and how long you should use it for.

In the past, wearable noise generators were set at a level that was so loud it blocked out the tinnitus. Nowadays, they are set at a level that is either just below or at the same pitch as the tinnitus.

*Where can I get them and what do they cost?*

You can get ITC and BTE models, combination instruments and 'shoes' as part of NHS tinnitus treatment in hospitals, where they should be free.

You can also buy them privately from certain hearing aid dispensers, but they can be expensive. If you are thinking of buying one, look for a hearing aid dispenser that offers you a trial period of at least 30 days. This will give you time to test out the noise generator in a wide range of settings to make sure it will benefit you.

ITC noise generators don't need a personal fitting, and so cost a lot less. Some NHS hospitals supply them. You can also buy them privately from private dispensers or by mail order from companies such as PureTone (see page 11 for contact details). If you are thinking of buying privately, you will get more from your noise generator if you buy it as part of a tinnitus management programme. Prices for noise generators start at £150, but you may be able to claim back VAT if you go through your GP or hospital.

### **Bedside or desktop noise generators**

Bedside or desktop noise generators have a built-in speaker and/ or plug-in headphones, a speaker that goes under your pillow, or an ITE receiver. These noise generators give out a range of soothing sounds such as light rain, a waterfall, a bubbling stream or birdsong. With some models, you can buy a range of additional sounds.

*Where can I get them and what do they cost?*

See *Where can I buy products that may help?* on page 10 for more information about buying a bedside or desktop noise generator. They cost between £20 and £65.

### **Pillow speakers**

Pillow speakers do not actually generate sound themselves – instead, you connect them to a sound source of your choice such as a DVD or CD player, radio, stereo or television. You slip the pillow speaker under your pillow and you can then listen to your choice of sound without having to wear headphones or earphones. As the sound comes through the pillow, it will not disturb other people as long as you set the volume correctly.

If your bedside clock radio has a sleep or snooze button, you can plug the pillow speaker into it and listen to it until it turns itself off. This means you can go to sleep without leaving the radio on all night. Pillow speakers are not designed to go under the mattress.

The Sound Pillow is a pillow with stereo speakers contained inside. You can connect it to any sound source and listen to the sound of your choice.

*Where can I get them and what do they cost?*

See 'Where can I buy products that may help?' on page 10 for more information about buying a pillow speaker. Pillow speakers cost between £6 and £10. The Sound Pillow costs around £25.

## Can I use ordinary household equipment to help manage my tinnitus?

Yes. For example:

- fans
- radios
- CD and MP3 players
- water fountains.

### Fans

Desktop fans usually make a whirring sound as their blades spin and they vibrate on the surface they're sitting on. Often the cheaper the fan, the louder the noise. You can expect to pay from about £15 upwards for a fan. Try DIY stores or shops that sell electrical goods.

### Radios

A radio tuned off-station on FM creates a *shh* noise that is similar to white or pink noise.

### CD and MP3 players

CD and MP3 players direct sound into the ears through headphones or earphones. Used at sensible volume levels, they are perfect for sound enrichment. You can also use them to play white/ pink noise or relaxing sounds.

**Products disclaimer:** information about products does not imply a recommendation by Action on Hearing Loss, or suggest that they are suitable for you. Please carry out your own enquiries before buying any of the products. For more information, contact the supplier or manufacturer of the equipment in which you are interested.

## Are there special CDs to help with tinnitus?

Yes. You can listen to relaxation CDs of soothing sounds such as the sea or other sounds of nature. Talking books can also be a relaxing and enjoyable way of taking your mind off your tinnitus. Look for CDs in bookshops, record shops and health or 'New Age' shops. We also produce our own range of tinnitus CDs (see next page).

## **Tune out tinnitus CDs**

We produce a range of specially designed CDs to help with tinnitus: the **Tune out tinnitus** range.

CDs in the range include:

*Water sounds*

*Nature sounds*

*Abstract sounds*

*Everyday sounds.*

To find out about these CDs, please contact us using the details given above.

## **Our website**

We also have a dedicated section on our website for information on managing tinnitus, including everyday tips and a forum to share experiences:

**[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/tinnitus](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/tinnitus)**

## **Where can I buy products that may help?**

We sell a range of equipment for people with hearing loss and tinnitus. Visit our shop at to buy items of equipment online. Alternatively, you can request a copy of the *Solutions* catalogue by contacting us directly.

1 Haddonbrook Business Centre, Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 6YX

Telephone 01733 361199

Textphone 01733 238020

Fax 01733 361161

[solutions@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:solutions@hearingloss.org.uk)

[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop)

## **Where can I get further information?**

### **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

Can provide a list of therapists in your area.

BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire LE17 4HB

Telephone 01455 883 316

Textphone 01455 550 243

[bacp@bacp.co.uk](mailto:bacp@bacp.co.uk)

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

### **British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)**

Provides information for professionals and the general public. You can search for a private BABCP-accredited therapist on their website.

Imperial House, Hornby Street, Bury BL9 5BN

Telephone 0161 705 4308

Fax 0161 705 4306

[babcp@babcp.com](mailto:babcp@babcp.com)

[www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

### **British Tinnitus Association (BTA)**

Campaigns for better services for people with tinnitus. It supports a network of local tinnitus groups around the UK, has a range of publications and produces a quarterly magazine, *Quiet*.

Ground Floor, Unit 5, Acorn Business Park, Woodseats Close, Sheffield S8 0TB

Telephone 0800 018 0527

Fax 0114 258 2279

Textphone 0114 258 5694

[info@tinnitus.org.uk](mailto:info@tinnitus.org.uk)

[www.tinnitus.org.uk](http://www.tinnitus.org.uk)

## **Hush**

The Hull tinnitus self-help group, who run a helpline and produce information for people with tinnitus.

109 Southella Way, Kirkella, Hull HU10 7LZ

Telephone 01482 656033

[hush@bbhoward.karoo.co.uk](mailto:hush@bbhoward.karoo.co.uk)

[www.tinnitusexplained.org](http://www.tinnitusexplained.org)

## **Puretone**

Sells wearable noise generators and desktop/ bedside sound generators.

9-10 Henley Business Park, Trident Close, Medway City Estate, Rochester Kent ME2 4FR

Telephone 01634 719 427

Fax 01634 719 450

[info@puretone.net](mailto:info@puretone.net)

[www.puretone.net](http://www.puretone.net)

## **UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)**

Provide information for the public and professionals. They can help you find a psychotherapist in the UK. You may find their website FAQs helpful.

2nd Floor Edward House, 2 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7LT

Telephone 020 7014 9955

Fax 020 7014 9977

[info@ukcp.org.uk](mailto:info@ukcp.org.uk)

[www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk)

## **Contact a local group**

If you feel you need more help with tinnitus directly from other people who also have it, you could contact a local tinnitus support group. They are set up and run by people with the condition or by professionals who work with tinnitus patients. The type of support and help they are able to offer varies between groups. The British Tinnitus Association has a comprehensive list of local support groups and contacts across the UK on its website.

## **Further information from Action on Hearing Loss**

Our helpline offers a wide range of information on many aspects of hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and our full range of factsheets and leaflets – see the cover page for contact details.

## **Action on Hearing Loss Information, May 2011**

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Registered Office: 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.

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