Help for tinnitus

What is tinnitus?
Tinnitus is the name given to noises that are heard, (usually in the ears and/or in the head), which are not generated by an external sound source. Tinnitus sounds are often described as ringing, whistling, buzzing and/or humming. Experiences of tinnitus are very common in all age groups and are rarely linked to any serious problem.

Tinnitus signals are thought to be initially generated within the hearing pathway. As these sounds are usually weak, people do not generally notice them. Sometimes attention is drawn to these signals for many different reasons. This may include exposure to loud noise, changes in hearing or emotional stress. Some people with tinnitus are not troubled by it, while others find tinnitus distressing and become anxious or annoyed when hearing it. This may cause the brain to ‘tune in’ to the tinnitus and react to it, which makes the tinnitus signals more noticeable.

The audiology tinnitus clinic
People with troublesome tinnitus are advised to see their general practitioner (GP). They may then be referred to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist, who will ensure that there is no underlying condition causing the tinnitus. They may also be referred to the well established tinnitus clinic in the audiology department at Addenbrooke’s Hospital, which comprises a team of audiologists who specialise in helping people with tinnitus. This clinic offers a range of therapies including counselling, sound enrichment and relaxation therapy. The therapy prescribed depends on the needs of the individual. Here follows an outline of what each of these therapies involve.

Counselling
The tinnitus clinic aims to provide personalised counselling to address each person’s specific needs. Information about tinnitus and tinnitus management options are discussed to help them to become less aware of the tinnitus. A greater understanding of tinnitus often helps people to change the way they react to it.

Sound enrichment
Many people notice their tinnitus more in quiet environments or at night. Sound enrichment works by having soothing music or some other environmental or natural sound quietly on in the background to fill the silence. This sound enrichment helps to distract people from listening to the tinnitus, thereby making it less noticeable. A sound generator with sounds such as wind, rain, streams or bird song may therefore be provided. Pillow speakers are also available, enabling soothing sounds to be heard without disturbing others in the room.
Sound generators can be left on at a low volume all night to act as a distraction if the person wakes up during the night when surroundings are otherwise quiet and the tinnitus is normally more noticeable.

If tinnitus causes distress throughout the day, an ear level sound generator may be provided. They generate a gentle rushing sound in the ear throughout the day with the aim of making the tinnitus sound less stark.

**Hearing aids and combination devices**
Some people with tinnitus also have a hearing loss. When this is the case, hearing aids may help. New technology in the form of open fit and digital hearing aids has allowed the prescription of hearing aids for much milder hearing losses than was previously appropriate. Hearing aids not only improve hearing but also make everyday environmental sounds clearer and more noticeable, which may lessen the focus on tinnitus. Combination devices provide both amplification for hearing loss and sound generator for tinnitus. Your audiologist will discuss both hearing aids and combination devices with you if they are appropriate.

**Relaxation therapy**
Tinnitus is often more noticeable when people are worried or tired, and this in turn can increase levels of anxiety and stress. This can become a vicious cycle. Regular relaxation can be very helpful in tinnitus management as it helps people to control their reactions to tinnitus and decrease the stress often associated with tinnitus. A CD may therefore be offered to aid relaxation of the mind and muscles, thereby making coping with bothersome tinnitus easier.

**Finding out more**
There are various useful websites and support organisations which provide helpful information about tinnitus and what can be done about it. Those recommended are:

**Cambridgeshire Tinnitus Support Group**
This group provides opportunities for people with tinnitus and their families to learn more about tinnitus and meet others with tinnitus to facilitate developing support networks.

More information can be obtained from Alan Yeo:
Telephone: 01223 243570.
E-mail: alan.yeo1@virgin.net

**British Tinnitus Association**

The British Tinnitus Association provides excellent support and advice for tinnitus and provide information on local support groups.
Action On Hearing Loss
http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk
This site provides a lot of information and contains a clear explanation of one model of troublesome tinnitus, Jastreboff neurophysiological model.

American Tinnitus Association
http://www.ata.org/
The American Tinnitus Association provides information regarding tinnitus management and it is possible to register for their monthly newsletter.

We are now a smoke-free site: smoking will not be allowed anywhere on the hospital site.
For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169.

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Authors
Audiology Department
Department
Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 0QQ www.cuh.org.uk
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