

Q & A

YOUR MEDICAL QUESTIONS ANSWERED



Q1

My Ears Are Ringing

There have been having ringing noises in my ears for a while now. They come and go but are not physically discomforting. Recently, I saw a movie in which a character suffers from a condition called tinnitus — it has a similar “ringing in the ears” symptom. To alleviate his condition, he listens to music through earphones. What causes tinnitus and can listening to music really help with my condition?

Tinnitus is the term used to describe the perception of noise that is not from an external source. The noise is usually only heard by the affected individual and is known as subjective tinnitus. Occasionally, another person may also hear the sound — this is called objective tinnitus.

The causes of objective tinnitus include the involuntary contraction of certain muscles in the ear or in the back of the nose — often perceived as a clicking noise. Another cause is the abnormal blood flow close to the affected ear; this is perceived as a whooshing or pulsating sound.

However, the vast majority of tinnitus is actually subjective and is frequently described by patient as a constant “eee” and “ooo” sounds. The sound can also be described as a ringing or a cricket chirp by some patients. The presence of subjective tinnitus may indicate some dysfunction of the cochlea (the ‘hearing’ part of the inner ear) but not all patients have a measureable hearing loss when clinically assessed.

Many patients only perceive tinnitus when they are in a quiet environment. Having background music can help to ‘mask’ the tinnitus. However, one needs to be careful not to have the music through headphones on too loudly, as that can result in further damage to the cochlea, resulting in worsening tinnitus and hearing loss.

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