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PARISH

PARISH NURSE MINISTRY NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2011

Tuning Out Tinnitus

"Out of the depths I have cried unto You, O Lord! Lord hears my voice. Let Your ears be attentive to my supplication."

— De Profundis.

Almost everyone hears ringing in their ears from time to time. Some people experience the sensation frequently. In the worst cases, it can be constant and debilitating. Roughly 23 million adults in the U.S. may have had this condition, known as tinnitus, in the past year, according to the National Institutes on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. It's often the first sign of hearing loss in older people and those who work in noisy environments, and adults over 40 are more susceptible

Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease, and can be caused by a number of conditions. Often described as a "phantom" ringing in the ears, it can, in fact, sound like a buzzing, clicking, hissing, whistling, humming, pulsing, or even music, and it can occur in one ear or both. But "just because it can't be cured doesn't mean the patient is doomed," says Michael J. Robb, M.D., an otoneurologist who specializes in the disorder and runs a clinic in Phoenix. "The tools and the technology have never been better for tinnitus relief."

STRATEGIES include:

- ◆ **Start with your doctor.** Sometime tinnitus has a simple cause, such as impacted earwax, which can be removed. In rare cases, it can signal a tumor, which might require surgery. It could also be the result of a neck injury, or more often, TMJ, or temporomandibular joint disorder. More than 200 drugs can cause tinnitus, so if you think you have the condition, review with your primary care doctor all your prescription and over-the-counter medication that you take. If the cause can't be determined, get a referral for an ear, nose, and throat specialist or an audiologist to evaluate your hearing.
- ◆ **Lifestyle changes.** Noise can cause or worsen tinnitus. If you can't avoid or reduce exposure to loud noises, wear earplugs. Eliminating stimulants, including coffee, tea, other caffeinated beverages, alcohol, and tobacco might alleviate symptoms. Also, try lowering your blood pressure, consuming less salt, exercising daily, lessening stress, and getting enough rest.
- ◆ **Hearing aides.** The better you hear, the less you might notice tinnitus. Hearing loss causes your brain to turn up its internal volume, and tinnitus is like feedback from an oversensitive microphone. A hearing aid or, in severe cases a cochlear implant (surgery) may be needed.
- ◆ **Counseling.** Counseling may help you to learn coping skills to help you control the noise. Cognitive behavioral therapy offers relaxation techniques and trains you to identify and control emotional triggers like stress. Although studies show it hasn't had a significant effect on the loudness of tinnitus, it has been found to improve quality-of-life aspects like hearing problems, sleep disturbance, and depression, which are often associated with tinnitus.
- ◆ **Soothing sounds.** White-noise machines, soft music, or a fan can help muffle tinnitus. Devices inside the ear can pipe in masking tones.
- ◆ **Drug therapies.** There are no drugs approved to treat tinnitus, but physicians sometimes prescribe antidepressants or benzodiazepines to treat related anxiety, insomnia, or depression. Any drug should be considered a last resort. People with tinnitus are at a greater risk for depression, and there's evidence that suggests that antidepressants might help. But be aware of the risks, which can include suicidal thoughts in young adults, teenagers, and children; drowsiness; drug interactions; sexual side effects; and paradoxically, tinnitus.

Excerpts from this article were from Consumer Reports On Health Magazine, Medical Matters, August 2011. Michael J. A. Robb, M.D. consultant in neurology, otoneurology and medical neuro-otology, Robb Oto-Neurology Clinic, Phoenix. You may view present and past Parish Nurse Articles on www.holyfamilystow.org or questions @ 330-688-6412 ext.462.

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