Your Health Reference Sheet
Topic: Tinnitus
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Tinnitus is a common disorder that affects an estimated 50 million adults in the United States with about 12 million of those people seeking medical help for severe tinnitus each year. For most people who have tinnitus, it's more of an annoyance and a distraction. However, in severe cases, it can affect both the ability to concentrate and to go to sleep. It can also create psychological distress, especially when it interferes with a person's work or relationships.

The sounds tinnitus produces can be intermittent or they can be continuous, even if a person isn't consciously aware of them. The sounds can change in nature and in intensity, meaning they can change from a buzzing to a hissing, and can change from being loud, drowning out external noises, to being more of a background noise. In rare cases, the sound beats in sync with your heart. Tinnitus can appear for no apparent reason and can disappear for no apparent reason; but if tinnitus is the result of a medical condition, then, in order for it to diminish, the condition must be successfully treated.

It isn't unusual for tinnitus to be diagnosed in the elderly as it's a common age-related problem associated with hearing loss. However, while tinnitus is often associated with hearing loss, it doesn't actually cause hearing loss nor does hearing loss cause tinnitus. In fact, many people suffering from tinnitus experience no hearing difficulty at all.

General Description

The term tinnitus is derived from the Latin word *tinnier,* which means to ring. Tinnitus is often referred to as "head noise," and it's characterized by ringing, roaring, buzzing, humming, chirping, whistling, and hissing in the ears in the absence of background noise. It's for this reason that you may be more aware of it at night when you're trying to fall asleep in a quiet room. Tinnitus affects both the acuity and clarity of hearing.

In tinnitus, the acoustic nerve transmits impulses to the brain that aren't the result of the sounds produced by external sound waves. Instead, the impulses are the result of stimuli that originate inside the ear or the head. In healthy ears, there are thousands of auditory cells that are covered with microscopic hairs that move in relation to the pressure of the sound waves. Movement of these hairs discharges electrical charges through the hearing nerve of the brain. The brain interprets these electrical signals as sound. If the