

Tinnitus in America: A National Study by the Better Hearing Institute

Commonly called “ringing in the ears,” tinnitus can be an endless source of torment for many who suffer from it, posing a relentless drain on quality of life. Once brushed aside as a symptom of old age, tinnitus is gaining increased national attention as the number of Americans suffering from it escalate, and as younger Americans—including our military personnel—become affected by it. Today, almost 30 million Americans suffer from persistent, chronic tinnitus.

In the largest study of its kind, the Better Hearing Institute surveyed 46,000 households in America with individuals who suffer from tinnitus. The study sought to determine more precisely than ever before the prevalence of tinnitus in America. It also documented the duration and intensity of the tinnitus that Americans experience. And it explored the impact that tinnitus is having on their quality of life. Importantly, the survey examined the nine most common therapies that Americans turn to for relief from tinnitus, and consumer perceptions of their efficacy.

“The urgency of addressing this all-too-often-debilitating medical condition has reached a crescendo,” says Sergei Kochkin, PhD, Executive Director of the Better Hearing Institute. “While the scientific community searches for a cure, the hearing healthcare community and the media need to increase public awareness of preventive measures against tinnitus and the most effective therapies for relief.”

About Tinnitus

Tinnitus is the sensation of an unwanted sound in the absence of any outside auditory stimulus. Noise exposure is the leading cause of tinnitus, and in individuals who develop tinnitus in this way, there is usually accompanying hearing loss.

Tinnitus can be constant or intermittent. It can be heard in one ear, both ears, or in the head. And tinnitus can originate in the middle ear (behind the eardrum) or in the sensorineural auditory system.

Ringling, humming, buzzing, and cricket-like noises are just some of the more common sounds that people with tinnitus report. In fact, tinnitus also can be a combination of sounds. And for many, the sound of their tinnitus can change. Occasionally, people with tinnitus even hear music or singing. This is different from someone who has a mental illness and is experiencing hallucinations. Tinnitus is not a ‘phantom sound’. There is real neural activity in the brain that the individual is hearing as tinnitus.

Study Findings

- Nearly 30 million people in the United States—or 10% of the population—have persistent, chronic tinnitus.
- The incidence of tinnitus is as high as 26.7% for people ages 65-84 years.
- People with more severe hearing loss are more likely to have tinnitus, but people with milder hearing losses also suffer from tinnitus.
- The average age of people with tinnitus is 57 years.
- 1 in 5 (22.2%) survey respondents described their tinnitus as disabling or nearly disabling.
- Nearly 4 in 10 respondents (39.1%) said they experienced their tinnitus 80% or more of the day.

- 21.6% of respondents described their tinnitus as loud; and the average respondent rated their tinnitus at 41% on a loudness scale.
- The average respondent rated their tinnitus at 39% on an annoyance scale.
- About 2 in 5 (39%) survey respondents reported that tinnitus affects their ability to hear.
- 1 in 4 (26%) reported that tinnitus affects their ability to concentrate.
- 1 in 5 (20%) reported that tinnitus affects their ability to sleep.
- 12% of survey respondents—representing about 3.6 million Americans—reported that tinnitus affects their leisure activities, social life, personal relationships, and emotional or mental health.
- 7% of respondents indicated that tinnitus affects their ability to work.
- Relatively few survey respondents (less than 7% for any given method) had sought treatment to mitigate their tinnitus—presumably due to a lack of awareness of the options available to them for relief.
- 13 million people reported that they have tinnitus but not hearing loss. However, it is widely acknowledged that people with tinnitus almost always have hearing loss. Therefore, it is likely that the hearing loss population is conceivably higher than previously reported; if fact approaching the 48 million people recently reported in a John Hopkins study.
- Based on the study findings, slightly more than 2 of 5 (42%) of people with tinnitus are hearing impaired and do not use hearing aids.
- Nearly half of the 25.8 million hearing impaired people in the U.S. who do not use hearing aids also suffer from tinnitus.
- Only 6.1% of tinnitus sufferers have ever used hearing aids to treat their tinnitus.
- 43.7% of survey respondents indicated that their hearing aids mitigated the effects of their tinnitus.
 - 15.7% experienced a mild reduction.
 - 14.1% experienced a moderate reduction.
 - 13.7% experienced a significant reduction.
- Nearly 2 out of 3 respondents who reported moderate-to-significant reduction in their tinnitus with hearing aids reported that hearing aids relieved their tinnitus most of the time to all of the time.
 - 3 out of 10 of these respondents reported that hearing aids alleviated their tinnitus all of the time.
- Respondents who had their hearing aids fit by professionals using comprehensive hearing and fitting protocols were nearly twice as likely to experience tinnitus relief than respondents fit by hearing care professionals using minimalist hearing and fitting protocols.
- 30% of respondents indicated that music mitigated the effects of their tinnitus.
- 10% of respondents indicated that relaxation techniques mitigated the effects of their tinnitus.

Study Conclusions

- This study indicates that many tinnitus sufferers report that the provision of hearing aids offers substantial benefit to a significant number of people suffering from tinnitus. This fact should be more widely acknowledged in both the audiological and medical communities.

- Hearing care professionals and their allied professional organizations need to promote awareness of the many successful counseling and sound therapy options, including hearing aids, that can help tinnitus patients.
- Careful hearing aid fitting is required for people with tinnitus. If comprehensive audiological services are used to fit hearing aids, there is a stronger probability that the individual with tinnitus will derive benefit from their hearing aids to treat their tinnitus.

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