



Tinnitus- what can help me sleep?

People with tinnitus commonly report that it is most troublesome at quiet times of the day. This can have an impact on getting to sleep. If you have difficulty sleeping then this factsheet provides information on the help available, along with self help tips including a breathing exercise provided by Dr Danuta Orlowska, a clinical psychologist.

At bed time when you have switched off your television or radio and can no longer hear the hum of the fridge your tinnitus may be more noticeable. If this worries you and causes you to think more about it, you may then also find it difficult to sleep.

Many people who have trouble sleeping may worry about what will happen if they have a poor night's sleep, thinking about how they will cope at work and if they will be able to concentrate. But thinking in this way may not be very helpful and can begin a vicious cycle.

If you wake in the night, although you may think it is due to your tinnitus, it is more likely because of your natural sleeping pattern. Waking in the quiet, with little to take your mind off the tinnitus, you are more likely to focus on it and begin to worry again.

What help is available?

If you have trouble with tinnitus and poor sleep, you may need help. One short term option might be sleeping tablets but although they can help calm the body, they might not help if you have a busy mind. Also, for some people these drugs may not be appropriate and you may not want to take such drugs. However, if you think sleeping tablets might be helpful, you should speak to your GP.

Another option which may be more helpful in the long term is to ask for a referral to a tinnitus clinic. There you will learn more about tinnitus, receive counselling and learn relaxation techniques. Alternatively, you might be referred for a specific therapy such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This therapy helps to reduce anxiety. It will look at unhelpful ways of thinking about tinnitus and unhelpful things you may do with regard to it, to help improve your quality of life.

Self-help tips

If you haven't already been to your doctor for help or if you are waiting for a referral there are things you can do to help you get a better night's sleep:

- It may be useful to prepare for sleep, by doing things that help you relax such as having a bath, stretching your muscles or having a warm milk drink.
- It is also a good idea to think of the time you feel most ready for sleep and to stick to it as a routine. However, it may not help to go to bed if you don't feel ready for sleep or to stay up too late and go past feeling sleepy.
- Also, if you get into bed, and then cannot fall asleep, Dr Grant Ingrams, a GP suggests not to 'toss and turn' but to get up until you feel sleepy again, possibly using the ideas above as a way to help you feel ready for sleep.
- When you are in bed, GP Dr Gordon Hickish, who himself has tinnitus, recommends listening to the radio quietly, or to music or nature sounds. This is an approach that can be beneficial for many people with tinnitus. While Dr Hickish finds listening to BBC Radio 4 helpful, using an ear piece to prevent it from disturbing anyone else, others may find nature sounds relaxing. It may be helpful to just open a bedroom window, otherwise, there are many nature sound CD's available.
- If you have a hearing loss so that playing quiet sounds at bedtime is not helpful, using your other senses may help distract your mind. For example, you might find it helpful to concentrate on smells from relaxing essential oils or picture something that makes you happy such as a favourite place.
- If you have a busy mind and this prevents sleep then Betty Hawthorne of the Sheffield Tinnitus Association recommends the following: Picture placing any thoughts or worries you have into a lidded box as if to say they can be stored away until a time when it is better to think about them. Also you could keep paper and a pen by your bed to jot down any thoughts or concerns you have so you can then forget about them until the morning.
- Dr Hickish says that although sleep problems may not be overcome overnight, if you can realise that tinnitus does not need to have a big impact on your life, it does become easier not to worry about it.

Breathing exercise to help you sleep

How easy is it to fall asleep when we are faced with danger or threat? Not very: as the priority in such circumstances is getting the body ready for "fight or flight" and not for sleep. When people are worried about their tinnitus and how it will affect their sleep, this can be seen as a situation of threat to their well-being. Their body is likely to enter a "fight or flight" state, which will only make the situation worse.

One of the things we can do to help our body unwind a bit from the “fight or flight” response is to try abdominal breathing. This involves taking slow steady breaths (not gulping or taking deep breaths quickly as that is hyperventilation and is linked with various unpleasant sensations including tingling and light-headedness)

The way I teach people about abdominal breathing is given below:

- Place your hands on your abdomen at around waist level with your middle fingers just touching.

When you breathe IN, you should get slightly bigger as the air enters your lungs.

- You will notice your middle fingers moving apart a small amount (or feel your abdominal area move).
- When you breathe OUT, your fingers will touch again.
- One cycle of IN and OUT is one breath.

Once you know how it feels to breathe like this, try the following breathing and counting exercise. You do not need to hold the IN breath, just breathe steadily in and out.

You might find that your speed of breathing slows down a little after a few such breaths to a more relaxed rate

1. Breathe IN and OUT: count ONE
2. Breathe IN and OUT: count TWO
3. Breathe IN and OUT: count THREE
4. Breathe IN and OUT: count FOUR
5. Breathe IN and OUT: count FIVE
6. Breathe IN and OUT: count SIX
7. Breathe IN and OUT: count SEVEN
8. Breathe IN and OUT: count EIGHT
9. Breathe IN and OUT: count NINE
10. Breathe IN and OUT: count TEN

Then when you have got to TEN, go back to ONE again

1. Breathe IN and OUT: count NINE
2. Breathe IN and OUT: count EIGHT
3. Breathe IN and OUT: count SEVEN
4. Breathe IN and OUT: count SIX
5. Breathe IN and OUT: count FIVE
6. Breathe IN and OUT: count FOUR
7. Breathe IN and OUT: count THREE
8. Breathe IN and OUT: count TWO
9. Breathe IN and OUT: count ONE

If you like counting sheep – make sure you only have ten sheep! With ten sheep you can count them out and back again and more easily lose track of time. If you have a thousand sheep, you know how long you have been counting if you get to 974 and you are still not asleep! The exercise above takes about 2 minutes and you can repeat it more than once.

Try this during the day as well as in the evening and even in bed (you'll find it easier to lie on your back if you are doing the breathing exercise in bed). It's free, portable and you never run out of batteries. Some of my patients have gained considerable benefit from this exercise.

Deafness Research UK is the only national medical research charity dedicated to helping people with deafness, tinnitus or other hearing problems.

Scientists are now predicting that within the next ten to fifteen years there could be a cure for some forms of deafness and much more effective treatments for tinnitus. Deafness Research UK is at the forefront of this work.

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