How does tinnitus change over time? – new study

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New research, using data from the UK Biobank, has revealed important information about the natural history of tinnitus, how it changes over time and its risk factors.

The study was led by Dr Piers Dawes from the University of Manchester with support from the British Tinnitus Association. The study looked at data from 168,348 people, with 4,746 assessed at a four-year follow-up.

Published in the journal *BMJ Open*, the research found that almost one-fifth of middle-aged people have permanent tinnitus and around one-third of these describe it as 'bothersome'. This is a much higher proportion of people than in other age groups: tinnitus affects an estimated one in eight adults in the UK.

Over time, 18.3% of people reported that they no longer had tinnitus. 9% reported an improvement, 9% said that it was more bothersome and the rest reported no change.

Dr Dawes commented: "This is an important study because it is based on a very large and diverse sample of UK adults and is one of very few to give information about people's long-term experiences of tinnitus. The study shows that tinnitus is persistent for most people. So it is really important to focus on preventing tinnitus in the first instance, and then on effective management of symptoms in people living with tinnitus."

The study also found that whilst men were more likely to experience tinnitus, women were more likely to report it as bothersome, as were hearing aid users and people on a low income.

The authors identified that the main controllable risk factor for tinnitus is exposure to noise at work. Other risk factors included age, hearing difficulties, ototoxic medication and neuroticism.

David Stockdale, Chief Executive of the British Tinnitus Association and a co-author of the study, said: "This paper shows how the use of existing bioresources can advance our knowledge of tinnitus. It's vital that these are better utilised, as the data contained could reveal crucial information to help our progress towards a cure for tinnitus."

The paper 'Natural history of tinnitus in adults: a cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis' can be read at https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/12/e041290.info

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Press contact

Nic Wray, Communications Manager

nic@tinnitus.org.uk

0114 250 9933

Editors Notes

- The British Tinnitus Association (BTA) is an independent charity that supports over one million people living with tinnitus each year, and advises medical professionals around the world. It is the primary source of support and information for people with tinnitus in the UK.
- Tinnitus is the sensation of hearing noises in your ear or head when there is no external cause. The noise can have virtually any quality including ringing, buzzing, hissing and whistling.
- Around 1 in 3 people will experience tinnitus at some point in their life. Over 7.1 million adults in the UK are living with persistent tinnitus, and for 10% of them, it can severely impact their quality of life, affecting sleep, mood, concentration, employment and relationships.
- There is not currently a cure for tinnitus, however, there are several strategies that can be helpful in learning to manage the condition.
- Tinnitus costs the NHS £750 million annually, with a cost to society of £2.7 billion per year.

www.tinnitus.org.uk

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British Tinnitus Association, Ground Floor Unit 5 Acorn Business Park, Woodseats Close, Sheffield, United Kingdom S8 0TB. The British Tinnitus Association is a registered charity. Registered charity number 1011145

Company Contact:

Tinnitus UK

T. 0114 250 9933
E. nic@tinnitus.org.uk
W. https://www.tinnitus.org.uk

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