

Learning to *break* the cycle of **Tinnitus**

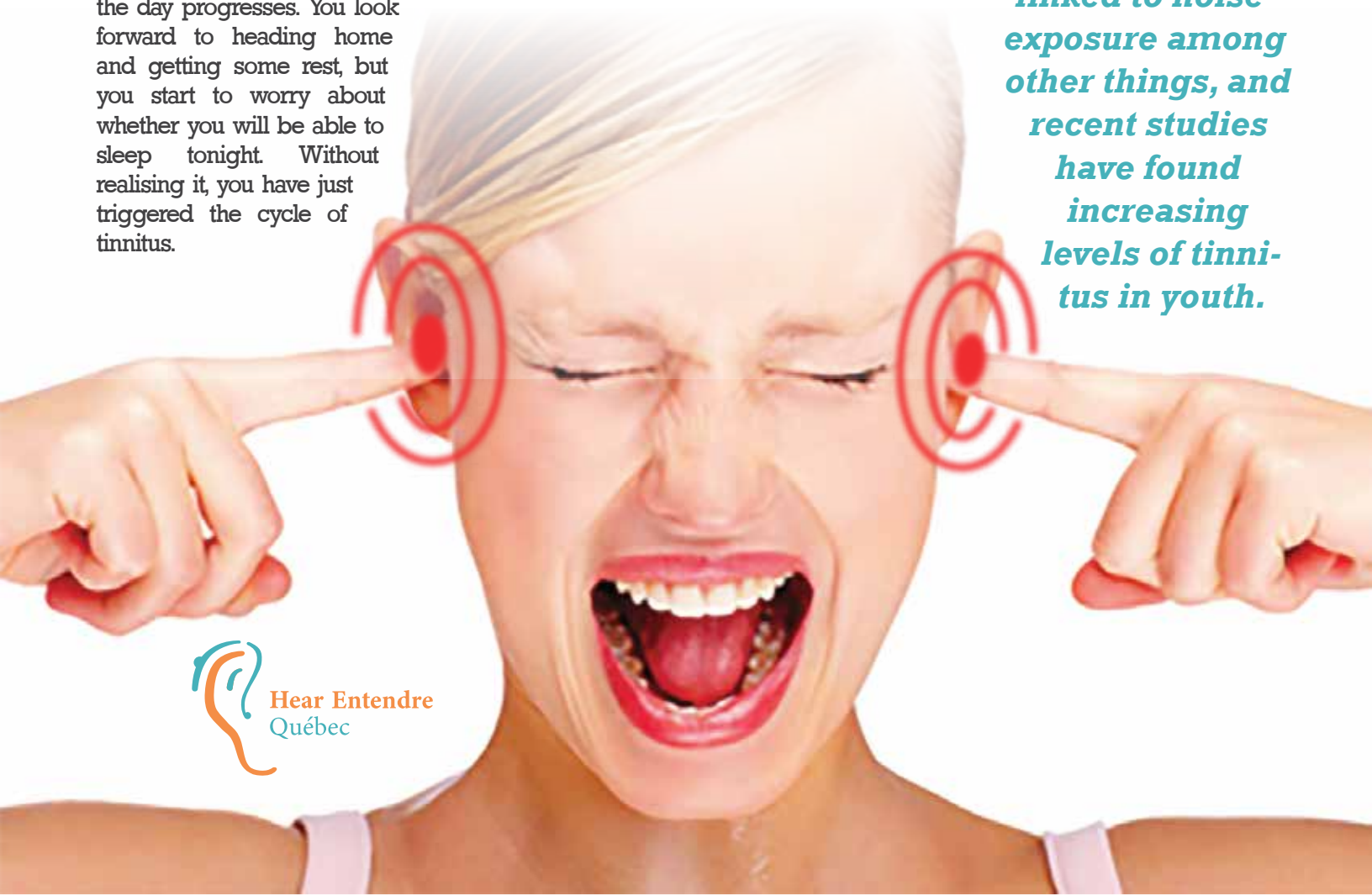
by **Dana Manolache**

After a long and tiring day, you can hardly wait to get a well deserved good night's sleep. You get ready, turn off the lights in your room and lay down on your bed. You are about to doze off when you suddenly notice a strange buzzing sound inside your ear. The more you focus on it, the more noticeable it becomes. A few minutes go by, and you cannot fall asleep anymore. After a seemingly restless night, you start your day feeling groggy and annoyed. That buzzing in your ear seems even louder as the day progresses. You look forward to heading home and getting some rest, but you start to worry about whether you will be able to sleep tonight. Without realising it, you have just triggered the cycle of tinnitus.

Many of us have, at one point in our lives, experienced that annoying ringing or buzzing in our ears, also known as tinnitus. In fact, tinnitus affects 10-15% of the Canadian population, and about 5% of sufferers describe their tinnitus as severe. The term, which may have been coined as early as the 1st century, refers to the perception of sound in the absence of any external noise. The sound may originate in one or

both ears or inside/outside the head, and can present as ringing, buzzing, clicking, pulsing, whistling, or roaring, among others. For some people, tinnitus is a temporary annoyance that does not disturb everyday activities. For others, it can become a chronic or permanent condition that interferes with sleep, concentration, employment, relationships, and overall quality of life.

Tinnitus has been linked to noise exposure among other things, and recent studies have found increasing levels of tinnitus in youth.



I started this article with an example of the cycle of tinnitus to introduce a strategy that is crucial in the management of tinnitus: distraction. Because anxiety is a key element in the exacerbation of tinnitus, audiologists often tell sufferers to avoid silence and to occupy themselves with other activities. Although it may seem easier said than done, distraction is one of the best ways to break the cycle of negativity associated with tinnitus. When you focus on other things besides your tinnitus, you are helping your brain to rewire itself. Whether it is reading, listening to music, watching a movie, or enjoying a social activity, distraction helps reduce the anxiety that often accompanies and aggravates tinnitus. There are several tools that can help tinnitus sufferers refocus their attention. Masking refers to the use of an electronic device to produce sounds that can cover up the tinnitus. For instance, noise generators may be used at night to help tinnitus sufferers fall asleep. Another option is a tinnitus instrument, which serves as both a hearing aid and masker for individuals with hearing loss.

Although the term tinnitus has been around for a long time, our understanding of the condition has greatly evolved throughout the years. In the past, some sufferers were told that there was no treatment for their tinnitus, and that they would simply have to learn to live with it. We now know that there are, in fact, numerous ways to manage tinnitus, and that sufferers should not despair. For those who experience tinnitus, you should first consult your general practitioner to rule out any treatable medical cause. A visit to the audiologist or ENT doctor may follow in order to conduct further testing and initiate

a treatment plan. The important thing is not to lose hope, and to remember that there is help out there for you.

On a final, more personal note, I would like to mention the importance of prevention. Tinnitus has been linked to noise exposure among other things, and recent studies have found increasing levels of tinnitus in youth. As an audiology student, I have become much more aware and cautious of noise exposure. Unfortunately, we live in a world where noise pollution is becoming more and more common, and it is difficult to protect ourselves from it. Every time I take

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the metro, I see young people with music blasting from their headphones, and I cannot help but worry about the long-term impact on their hearing. Please protect your ears, and remind family members and friends to do so as well, because prevention is the best cure.

If you would like more information about tinnitus, please feel free to consult Hear Quebec's library or your health care professionals.

References

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Dana is an Audiology student at the Université de Montréal. She recently started volunteering at Hear Québec, and is excited for the opportunity to work alongside the hard of hearing community. She hopes that this experience will help her to become an audiologist who is more attuned to her patients' needs.