



Tinnitus Triggered by Ototoxic Drugs: Strategies to Protect Your Hearing Health

By Neil Bauman, PhD

Currently, I know of at least 657 drugs (and still counting) that list tinnitus as a possible side effect. In addition, I know of 10 herbs and 31 chemicals that can do the same.

Two common drugs you may not realize that may cause tinnitus is the anti-inflammatory drug Ibuprofen, and the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) Citalopram®. In fact, more people complain to me via email about getting tinnitus from taking these two drugs than from taking other drugs.

Strategies to Avoid Tinnitus

The following three strategies may reduce your risk of getting tinnitus from drugs.

1 Take medication only when absolutely necessary.

Instead of always taking medication, first seek to correct underlying health problems. Typically, drugs only mask symptoms. Thus, you end up taking the drug “forever,” because when you stop, the symptoms reappear. By digging down to the root cause of your health problems and fixing them, in most cases you may not need medication. Unfortunately, Americans seem to be a nation of pill poppers.

Sometimes, drugs are prescribed unnecessarily, especially to older adults, as noted by Dr. Sidney Wolfe, the Health Research Group founder

and senior advisor of Public Citizen’s *Worst Pills, Best Pills News*, which can be found at www.citizen.org. The result is that what might have been a minor problem can become a major problem.

“What you *can* do to reduce your risk of getting tinnitus is look at reports of tinnitus occurrence for each drug.”

Below are comments from people who found that the side effects of drugs their doctors prescribed were worse than the conditions they were supposed to help.

Three years ago, after taking Bupropion for 6 months for depression, I woke up with tinnitus. At that point, my tinnitus was a “static” sound—not fun—but bearable. I was told by my doctors that there was no connection between this drug and my tinnitus, but [I] stopped [the medication] anyway. I have had tinnitus ever since. A few weeks ago, I started taking Bupropion again, falsely believing it wasn’t related to my tinnitus. Now my tinnitus is a louder, shriek-

ing sound. I will never take this drug again because it seems I have to listen to this terrible sound for the rest of my life. I would never have chosen this over my depression, if I had [had] even the slightest idea this could be a side effect. That I took this drug for depression is so ironic.

Another person wrote,

I had an injury to my foot and took Ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) for the pain. Shortly thereafter, the ringing in my ears started. I had no idea this could happen and would never have taken Ibuprofen, if I had known this would happen.

Therefore, to reduce your risk of getting tinnitus, go easy on drugs. If you choose to take medication, make sure you know that the benefits will clearly outweigh the potential side effects. Ask your doctor to justify that a given drug is really necessary—not the casual “let’s try this and see what happens,” because in some cases, one of the risks is that tinnitus can manifest.

Before taking medications, make lifestyle and dietary changes to improve your health. The goal is to work with your physician, keeping them informed of what you are doing and who you are working with to eliminate underlying health problems, so medications are less likely to be needed.

Some alternatives for improving and maintaining your health include:

- Change your diet. Did you know that more than 80 percent of health problems can be linked to poor diet? According to prolific author and natural health advocate Dr. Joseph Mercola, who's an osteopathic physician, your diet should consist of mostly raw and lightly steamed vegetables and fruits. Cut way down on all sugars. Ideally, reduce your sugar intake from all sources to less than 25 grams per day—that's less than two tablespoons of sugar from all sources, including drinks, processed foods, fruits, etc.
- Balance diet and lifestyle with attention to the role of vitamins. For example, most people are low in Vitamin D3, and this affects many areas of your body, including your mental health. (Vitamin D affects more than 3,000 genes.) To be effective, your optimal blood vitamin D3 levels should be in the range of 50-70 nanograms per milliliter (ng/ml). Many people's levels are around the 20 ng/ml level—far below the optimal level, and your health suffers as a result. So, go outdoors and absorb the benefits of

natural sunlight, which enable your body to make its own vitamin D.

- Learn more about other less-traditional healthcare providers, such as naturopathic doctors (NDs), and see them when appropriate. For instance, it may make sense to see an osteopathic doctor (DO), who is a fully licensed physician trained to focus on the prevention of illness and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Consider the role of a chiropractor trained to address the upper cervical spine, because some ear problems can stem from the top two vertebrae in the neck not being aligned properly.
- Exercise more. Just get moving.
- Get adequate sleep. If you short yourself on sleep, both your physical and mental health suffer.
- Consider counseling rather than drugs, unless absolutely necessary, for depression, anxiety, and related issues.

My own philosophy is that drugs should be your last line of defense, not your first line of attack. Too many people take drugs as their first, and only, choice because it is easier to pop a pill than to make the effort to do any of the

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above. As a result, the risk of getting tinnitus can increase unnecessarily.

2 Choose the drug least likely to be ototoxic.

If medication is required, talk to your healthcare provider about which drugs are least likely to aggravate or cause tinnitus. This may be a different drug in the same drug class, or a drug in a different class. Take the lowest effective dosage possible.

Ask your doctor to prescribe the lowest dose that will treat your condition; many drugs do not exhibit ototoxic side effects when taken in low doses. For example, one woman told me her tinnitus became noticeably louder when her doctor put her on a higher dose of Irbesartan to control

Top 20 Drugs Linked to Triggering Tinnitus

Top 20 tinnitus-producing drugs, based on the number of reports submitted to the FDA's database. The drugs are listed in descending order, from most reports (highest risk) to fewest reports (lower risk) and are listed by their generic name, followed by the common brand name in italics:

Alendronate (*Fosamax*[®])

Acetylsalicylic acid (*aspirin*)

Paroxetine (*Paxil*[®])

Alprazolam (*Xanax*[®])

Bupropion (*Wellbutrin*[®])

Venlafaxine (*Effexor*[®])

Metoprolol (*Lopressor*[®])

Acetaminophen (*Tylenol*[®])

Hydrocodone (*Vicodin*[®])

Atorvastatin (*Lipitor*[®])

Omeprazole (*Prilosec*[®])

Duloxetine (*Cymbalta*[®])

Clonazepam (*Klonopin*[®])

Gabapentin (*Neurontin*[®])

Amlodipine (*Norvasc*[®])

Ibuprofen (*Advil*[®])

Lisinopril (*Zestril*[®])

Lorazepam (*Ativan*[®])

Sertraline (*Zoloft*[®])

Quetiapine (*Seroquel*[®])



her high blood pressure. When she complained to her doctor, he reduced the dose to its old level and her tinnitus also dropped back to its old level.

3 Take medication for the shortest time possible, as recommended by your doctor.

Ask your doctor to prescribe medications for the shortest duration possible, because some ototoxic drugs do not damage your ears in the short term. However, if taken long term, the risk of them damaging your ears increases. By taking a medication for only two weeks, for example, you may avoid ototoxic side effects, whereas taking the same drug for several months may cause ear problems.

Can Foods and Herbal Medicines Cause Tinnitus?

A woman asked, *I wondered if you knew about the ototoxicity of various foods. I read that tea is high in salicylates, as are a lot of fruits. Does this mean that drinking/eating these things can make my existing tinnitus worse?*

Certain foods can cause tinnitus, but typically – as long as you don’t go off the deep end and consume copious amounts (or far more than the recommended dose) – you shouldn’t worry about getting tinnitus from food.

For example, I’ve been asked whether you can get tinnitus from eating foods high in salicylates, which is the basic ingredient in aspirin and some other medications for pain relief. Some fruits, vegetables, and spices are naturally high in salicylates, but, even so, the amount they contain is far less than what could cause tinnitus.

Curry powder is a good example. It has the highest salicylate content of any known food—218 mg. per 100 g.

To consume the equivalent salicylates contained in six adult aspirin—the amount of aspirin that could cause tinnitus—you’d have to choke down almost four pounds of pure curry powder—at one sitting!

The same applies to raisins. Raisins are relatively high in salicylates (6.62 mg. per 100 g.). To get the equivalent salicylates found in six adult aspirin, you’d have to gorge yourself on 144 pounds of raisins at one time. By the time you did that, tinnitus would be the least of your worries.

Drug Results Are Unique to Each Person

Each one of us is unique, and so is our response to drugs. This means that a drug that gives me tinnitus may not cause your tinnitus to increase and vice versa. As a result, it is hard to know which drugs you should stay away from and which you can take safely if you want to avoid tinnitus or other ototoxic side effects.

What you can do to reduce your risk of getting tinnitus is look at reports of tinnitus occurrence for each drug. The more people who report getting tinnitus from taking a given drug, the greater your risk, if you take that drug.

Unfortunately, there is no single source for this kind of information. You can do what I do and search through numerous drug books and online databases to try to ferret out the risk of tinnitus (or other side effects) that are reported for a given drug. This can be extremely time consuming, which is why I have compiled this kind of information into a single source—the book *Ototoxic Drugs Exposed*—available at hearinglosshelp.com or through Amazon.

Will My Tinnitus be Temporary or Permanent?

If your tinnitus is secondary to drug-induced hearing loss, then you could expect it to last as long as the resulting hearing loss. Thus, if you have temporary hearing loss from taking a certain drug, and you stop taking that drug – and your hearing returns in a few days to a few weeks – you could expect your tinnitus to fade away as your hearing returns. However, if your drug usage results in permanent hearing loss, then don’t be surprised if your tinnitus also proves to be permanent.

When tinnitus is a primary side effect, it is impossible to predict whether your tinnitus will be temporary or permanent. With the use of some drugs, tinnitus will be temporary for some people and permanent for others. It doesn’t seem fair, but that is the way it is. 

Neil Bauman, PhD, is the founder and CEO at the Center for Hearing Loss Help. He is a hearing loss coping skills specialist, researcher, author, and speaker on hearing loss. Bauman helps hard-of-hearing people adapt successfully to hearing loss, tinnitus, and balance problems while minimizing future damage to their ears—particularly from the effects of ototoxic drugs. He is the author of eleven books and more than 1,000 articles on hearing loss topics, including more than 160 articles related to ototoxic drugs.

*The third edition of his book, *Ototoxic Drugs Exposed*, describes over a thousand drugs, herbals, and chemicals that can (and do) damage ears.*

