

A million people suffer from tinnitus -- in province of Quebec alone

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Université de Montréal Professor Sylvie Hébert is conducting a study exploring the root causes of tinnitus, a condition that creates the perception of sound in the absence of external stimulation. Tinnitus affects 20 percent of Quebecers 55 and older in Quebec, which represents one million people.

"The auditory sensations sound like buzzing or whistling in one or both ears," says Professor Hébert of the Université de Montréal's Faculty of Medicine School of Speech Therapy and Audiology and researcher at both the Institut universitaire de gériatrie de Montréal and the BRAMS.

"It is pretty hard to study because only the suffering patient can describe the intensity. In addition, tinnitus isn't observable with current clinical tools," says Hébert, noting the job may be difficult but not impossible and she has devised a two-part study.

The first part subjected more than 20 subjects to a variety of auditory perception tasks in order to measure the neural correlates of tinnitus using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). The second part explored the physiological pathway. The objective is to study the correlation between stress and tinnitus and demonstrate the role of endocrinal processes in normal and abnormal auditory perception.

"Tinnitus can emerge after an ear infection, such as a poorly treated ear inflammation (otitis), sound trauma such as a gun shot or loud concert speakers, or hearing deterioration from aging known as presbycusis," says Hébert. "In certain cases, tinnitus could result from a disorder of the auditory nerve fibers, which would send auditory information to the central nervous system in the absence of prior stimulation."

Currently, no medication exists. However,

according to Hébert, classic hearing aids that increase external sounds can help. Also, auditory prosthesis that create a sound comparable to a waterfall can help mask the buzzing and whistling of tinnitus.

Source: University of Montreal

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