

# Tinnitus and the Food We Eat

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Salmon fillet, steamed broccoli, chocolate ice cream. For some people, that's not only a tasty dinner. It's a recipe for quieter tinnitus. Conversely, pork chops, blue cheese dressing, and red wine is, for some, a recipe for louder tinnitus.

Dinner might not be the most technical tinnitus topic. But when you consider that our bodies are, after all, big chemistry labs, and that every meal is more or less an experiment, our dining choices do seem more scientific. We all know that one food can affect two people quite differently. Strawberries, juicy and delicious to me, are a trip to the emergency room for someone else who is highly allergic to them. For most people, fortunately, food does not affect their tinnitus in an observable way. Still, some people are adamant about the connection.

All food — from organic carrots to highly processed hotdogs — is made up of complex chemicals that our digestive system breaks down into molecules for energy and nutrition. If everything we eat matches up to everything we need to run our bodies, and if our bodies are able to absorb the needed nutrients, then ideally we're well-nourished. If, however, we have sensitivity to something we eat, or if illness keeps us from using the nutrients correctly, or if we simply don't eat nutrient-rich foods, then chemical reactions take place that can make us feel unwell.

## How do people discover their tinnitus food triggers?

Paul Tobey discovered his by "trial and error, and error, and error, and error, and trial!" For him, beef, beans, and green veggies are a "yes"; wheat, soy, salty foods, and caffeine are a "no." (*Read his story on page 20.*) One woman finds that foods containing salicylates (almonds, berries, peaches, tea, tomatoes, and dozens more) make her tinnitus louder — even though salicylate is in extremely small quantities in those foods. Steering clear of them, she says, keeps her tinnitus under control. Another woman reports that taking fish oil supplements or, better yet, eating salmon, cod, and other oily fish, brings her tinnitus volume down.

Science offers slim support for these observations — at least for these *exact* observations. A study by researcher Derebery (2000) showed a direct connection to untreated food allergies and the worsening of Ménière's symptoms, which include tinnitus. "For the majority of [our Ménière's] patients," she wrote, "allergy shots — if they have airborne allergies — or diet if they have food allergies, is very effective in controlling the vertigo and tinnitus. The inner ear may be the target, directly or indirectly, of an allergic reaction."

Then there's the Cacace et al. study (2003) of a woman who — under close medical observation — ate a potato knish, had a massive allergic reaction to the sulfites in it (elevated heart rate and an extreme diuretic effect), and immediately had dramatic tinnitus reduction and improved hearing.

Tinnitus clinician and researcher Michael Seidman, M.D, is not surprised at the knish eater's sulfite reaction. "When our Ménière's patients are given a large dose of a diuretic, their hearing improves. I suspect that the diuretic effect of the sulfite allergy elicited the response."

A food allergy or intolerance can be spotted with *challenge* or *rotation* diets in which certain foods are eliminated from the diet for a week or more, then reintroduced one at a time. If a negative reaction occurs when a food is eaten again, it's probably time to suspect that particular food. These types of diets need physician guidance since the list of foods that can be eaten is very restrictive at first.

And then there's tinnitus — that willful symptom that can fluctuate all on its own, or when we're under stress or around loud sounds for too long, or when we take a drug that our ears are sensitive to. If you suspect that a particular food is a culprit, test it more than once before you take it out of your diet. You might discover a way to control your tinnitus, or that your diet is just fine as far as your ears are concerned. There's no need to deprive yourself of something you like to eat without good cause. Being deprived of quiet, well, that's quite enough. 🍷

### References

Cacace, A.T., Silver, S.M., Farber, M. (2003 May-Jun) Rapid recovery from acoustic trauma: chicken soup, potato knish, or drug interaction? *American Journal of Otolaryngology*, 24(3), 198-203.

Derebery, M.J. (2000 Feb) Allergic management of Meniere's disease: an outcome study. *Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery*, 122(2), 174-82.