

A ringing that never stops

Depending on how you read *Between the Spokes*, you could be just about anywhere right now. You could be kicked back in a comfy recliner, standing in a crowded metro train car, or sitting at your desk at work, trying to eat lunch without getting any mustard on your shirt.

No matter where you are or what you're doing, I want you to stop and focus on these words. Take a few deep breaths. Straighten up your back. Close your eyes. Concentrate for 30 seconds or a minute. Go ahead—I'll wait.

What could you hear going on around you? Our world is filled with sound, whether it's pleasing, important or just plain annoying. Every now and then, you find yourself alone in a room with no TV, computer or radio and you can pause and enjoy a few moments of total silence.

Imagine a world in which there is never any real silence. Imagine a world where your noise floor (the level of ambient noise over which any sound you want to listen to must be heard) is constantly requiring you to ask people "What did you say?" and raise TV and radio volumes to the point that others start to question your aural integrity.

That world, the one in which a person has a constant elevated noise floor, is caused by a condition called *tinnitus*. According to the American Tinnitus Association, about 50 million Americans suffer from this condition. It's marked by a persistent phantom noise, most often taking the form of rushing, ringing, buzzing, hissing, roaring, whistling or clicking. In my case, tinnitus sounds like tuning an old AM radio between stations and just listening to the static.

There are a lot of reasons why subjective tinnitus (a noise that only you can hear) strikes people. The most common—and incidentally, the most preventable—is simply prolonged exposure to high sound pressure levels (SPL). Working on a flight line, playing in a rock band, riding a motorcycle, shooting, going to concerts, working in a factory and a hundred other situa-

tions can contribute to tinnitus.

Simply growing older can also cause tinnitus, as the tiny bones in the inner ear can stiffen or deform due to age or poor nutrition. More rare causes of tinnitus are Meniere's disease (a disorder affecting the fluid in the inner ear), temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJ), head or neck injuries or tumors, blood vessel disorders (such as atherosclerosis or high blood pressure), and as a side effect of certain medications, including antibiotics, diuretics and extremely high doses of aspirin.

Treatments can vary from reasonable to extreme. Many tinnitus sufferers report that simply cutting back on caffeine and sugar has lessened their symptoms, while others say sticking to a low-carb diet is what worked for them. There's currently research being undertaken related to placing magnets against the head that, believe it or not, is showing promise.

Tinnitus is a very serious condition for a big reason: it can cause depression. Not being able to get rid of this ringing in the ears has been shown to cause deep, impenetrable depression in some sufferers and unfortunately, most of the medications prescribed to treat depression exacerbate tinnitus! In some cases, it can cause a person to develop rage issues, as having that constant noise in their head acts as an extreme irritant.

It's also a warning sign, telling you that something is wrong. Whether it's your health or your lifestyle, tinnitus tells you that it's time to reassess your behavior in some way and start making changes to protect your hearing.

As motorcyclists, we regularly



expose ourselves to high SPLs simply by riding. A good helmet can help protect you from wind noise, but a poorly designed helmet can actually increase wind noise by not channeling air in an efficient fashion. The best and easiest way to protect yourself against hearing loss and tinnitus (besides not standing next to a drummer) is to use ear plugs every time you ride—no matter what helmet you use, how fast you ride or how far you're going.

I advocate the use of custom silicone earplugs, which I get every couple of years from my audiologist. As you can see in the photo, my daughter has them too. They make a mold with some magic goo and a few weeks later I have nice, fresh, new earplugs. Yes, they're a little expensive, but to me the ability to clean and reuse precisely fitting plugs outweighs the convenience and disposability of foam roll-up plugs that many riders use. My wife, on the other hand, prefers the foam plugs, which you can buy at any drug store for just a few dollars.

Protect your hearing and prevent tinnitus by using earplugs any time you're in a high-SPL environment. Believe me, you don't want to be afflicted by a ringing in your ears that never stops.

for more info see

www.ata.org