

Some people are told that stress and the use of aspirin, caffeine, and salt can make it worse. Then they are told that otherwise, nothing can be done. Millions of people believe that they have a problem with no solution. Why? Because for years even physicians thought that there was no way to treat tinnitus.

Tinnitus is a sound you perceive, although there is no external cause. It is commonly thought of as a ringing in the ears, although it can sound like static or birds, a motor running, or someone breathing into a microphone. What can you do about a sound that is all in your head? Enter Flatiron Audiology, Inc.'s Dr. Julie Eschenbrenner. She can be found in the Community Physicians Pavillion at 300 Exempla Circle, Suite 365 in Lafayette. She is a board certified audiologist and a master cookie chef. This is not a combination one would expect and not what she was planning when she started in the field in 1998, however. "I originally chose to work with hearing-impaired infants and their families. Now I run a comprehensive hearing clinic for ages 6 months and up." She attended the University of Colorado at Boulder for her master's degree and The University of Florida for her doctorate degree. Then she worked for an ear, nose, and throat clinic in Vancouver, Washington and along the Oregon coast. "I was doing diagnostics and hearing aid work there. I moved back and started an audiology department at a multi-specialty clinic in Longmont."

As an audiologist, she says she can focus on the patient and not on the apparatus. She doesn't have to push for what the patient doesn't need. "We have an evaluation process so we can address the individual. It isn't about selling them a specific hearing aid or an expensive treatment if they don't need it. I started my own clinic to address hearing loss and tinnitus in an ethical manner. I wanted the patients to be in control of the decision." But she admits that she didn't realize the size of the problem until she started her own practice. "We held a seminar on hearing aids and 19 people showed up. Then we held one on tinnitus and 200 people showed up."

Tinnitus affects 17% of the population, or over 44 million Americans. "A typical audiologist can't do some of the testing we can do," Dr. Eschenbrenner explains. "We test the ultrahigh frequencies where tinnitus is typically found." She continues, "The nice thing that can be done is that people with tinnitus can have a comprehensive hearing and tinnitus evaluation. It's very validating to have someone say, 'It isn't all in your head... you aren't making this up.' It is not a condition in and of itself, but a side effect of something. The possible causes are in the hundreds. And while there is no cure, we can help treat it."

An evaluation will not just examine the frequency, but the intensity and also how much it takes to cover the tinnitus for each individual. Is it a sound that comes and goes, or is it an

unending backdrop to every minute of every day? Hyperacusis, or a sensitivity to loud sounds, is also common with people who have tinnitus.

Flatirons Audiology, Inc. has several options to enhance tinnitus and hearing health. However, Dr. Eschenbrenner's main treatment for tinnitus is called Neuromonics. "It is the only clinically validated FDA-cleared treatment for people 18 and over. There are only five treatment centers in the state. I have clients from Montana and Idaho." Neuromonics is an acoustic solution—a combination of music and sound that encourages the neural pathway to adapt so that it is no longer generating random noises. Dr. Eschenbrenner says the sounds are customized to each person and that it is a treatment program that takes place over a course of six to eight months.

It begins with a listening device (the size of a cell phone) that is used for a few hours each day. The device allows the patient to become less aware and less disturbed by their tinnitus, hopefully leading to a great ability to concentrate, relax, and enjoy quiet activities. Over time, patients may notice improvement even when they are not wearing the device. By visiting flatironsaudiology.com, you will not only find information about the variety of services and treatments available to you, but you will also find a link to the Neuromonics site. Here you can see what the device looks like and even test the different sounds of tinnitus.

However, by visiting online and not in person, you are cutting yourself off from an essential component of Dr. Eschenbrenner's practice. There are homemade cookies in the office, although there are never peanut butter cookies due to food allergies. And there is one customer who doesn't like chocolate so that variety isn't made when she's coming in. "I have Wednesdays off," Dr. Eschenbrenner says.

"I put my 2-year-old down for his nap, and then my 4-year-old son and I make cookies. He loves it. I have old family recipes." And grateful clients. "They even stop in when they don't have appointments just to sample."

The future for tinnitus patients is improving. Dr. Eschenbrenner says she foresees a change in the attitudes of general practitioners as more of them learn that tinnitus is a condition that does exist and that there is appropriate and various viable treatment options available.

There is a seminar on Sept. 16, and they are discussing tinnitus and tinnitus treatment options. It will be in the main conference room at the Exempla Good Samaritan Medical Center on Highway 287 in Lafayette from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Meanwhile, you can visit Flatirons Audiology, 300 Exempla Circle, Suite 365 in Lafayette. Call for an appointment and a cookie at 303-664-9111.

"Tinnitus is like looking through a screen door. Some people can learn to see what's beyond the screen. We listen so you can hear."

FLATIRONS AUDIOLOGY, INC.

By Sandi Hall



Dr. Julie Eschenbrenner