

News / Calgary

Calgary audiologist tunes in to tinnitus

Tinnitus is the phantom perception of sounds without an external sound source and often interpreted by the brain as a ringing, buzzing or pulsing sound



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Bonita Chow, founder of Tinnitus and Hearing Health Calgary, helps people who suffer from the persistent ringing in the ears caused by tinnitus.

By: Elizabeth Cameron For Metro, Published on Wed Feb 14 2018

Even if you don't have all the pieces, you can still see the puzzle picture – just ask Bonita Chow, the first Tinnitus Care Provider in Canada.

The Calgary audiologist of more than a decade became frustrated with the standard treatment available to people suffering from tinnitus – defined as the phantom perception of sounds without an external sound source and often interpreted by the brain as a ringing, buzzing or pulsing sound – so she sought out specialized training from the University of Iowa in 2016.

“For me, it was wanting more of those resources available so I can be in a better position to help these people,” Chow told Metro. “I was constantly being frustrated because I couldn't help them because they weren't candidates for hearing aids, and there was no other services available.”

According to the Canadian Hearing Society, [10 to 15 per cent](#) of the population is affected by tinnitus, and roughly five per cent experience symptoms that interfere with their daily life.

Chow's clinic, Tinnitus and Hearing Health Calgary, is also one of the few in Canada exclusively dedicated to the evaluation and treatment of tinnitus, decreased sound tolerance, and hearing loss.

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When a new patient comes in – often under the impression they're going to have to get used to living with the phantom sound – Chow runs a series of tests to examine not only their auditory system, but lifestyle factors such as sleep patterns to determine what's impacting their tinnitus.

"I liken each test that I run as pieces of a puzzle," said Chow. "I may not have every single piece of the puzzle at my disposal, but I try to have as many as possible – then I try to fit together the pieces the best I can, to try and figure out a coherent picture of what's going on, and how we can move forward."

Historic approaches to tinnitus were based on masking, Chow explained, which uses white-noise to drown out the perceived sound.

"But ultimately at the end of the day, if you turn off the white noise, guess what? Your tinnitus is still there – and we haven't addressed why tinnitus is so distressing to you in the first place," she said.

"Not that any treatment actually makes it go away, unfortunately, but ultimately, we're trying to look at the areas it negatively impacts your life and what we can do about it."

Chow's toolbox includes several therapies that can help her patients hear something other than their tinnitus – including using tinnitus sound generators to emit therapeutic sounds into a person's ear, or beside their bed at night.



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Tinnitus sound generators emit therapeutic sounds, including music and from nature, to offer people relief from the ringing in their ears. They can be worn in the ear or left beside a bed during sleep.

"What I do is evidence-based, I don't prescribe experimental therapies ... I can't be offering false hope to my patients," Chow emphasizes. "A huge part of it is the patient education, to get them to overcome these

thoughts and emotions – as completely valid as they are – and try to replace them with something that’s more conducive for a patient to move on with their life.”

She said part of the problem is, not many health care professionals – or even the general population – knows what tinnitus is.

“Because there’s no cookie-cutter solutions, there’s really not a lot of professionals willing to invest the time and the training to go learn about what tinnitus is,” Chow said. “But one person at a time, I try to raise awareness that help is available.”

Neuroscientist Dr. Michael Chrostowski, who co-founded a company in Hamilton, Ont. in 2012 called Sound Options Tinnitus Treatments Inc., said there is significant demand for more tinnitus specialists, like Chow, in Canada.

“The problem in Canada has been that we haven’t had as much awareness about tinnitus and how many people suffer with it,” Chrostowski told Metro. “I think we may not have known how big the need (for treatment) is.”

Still, since he got into the field, Chrostowski said he’s noticed a shift in awareness amidst the population and health care professionals.

“I’ve been working with tinnitus for more than 10 years and it’s definitely changed a lot, but even compared to other countries there’s still a long way to go,” he said.