

Association of Autoimmune Diseases with Tinnitus: A Narrative Review

Afsaneh Doosti^{1,2}, Mohammad Ali Shabani³, Zahra Jeddi^{1,2}, Ali Hajimohammadi^{1,2*}

¹. Department of Audiology, School of Rehabilitation Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

². Orthopedic and Rehabilitation Research Center, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

³. Student Research Committee, School of Rehabilitation Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

ORCID ID:

Afsaneh Doosti: 0000-0002-0816-5622

Mohammad Ali Shabani: 0009-0001-4817-4988

Zahra Jeddi: 0000-0002-8939-0361

Ali Hajimohammadi: 0009-0000-2796-6655

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* **Corresponding Author:** Department of Audiology, School of Rehabilitation Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran. alihajmohamadi9@gmail.com

Short running title: The Association of Autoimmune Diseases with...

Highlights:

- Tinnitus is highly prevalent in patients with autoimmune diseases (ADs)
- Autoimmune inner ear disease had the highest tinnitus prevalence (up to 95.7%)
- Hearing assessments should be considered in AD patients

ABSTRACT

Background and Aim: Autoimmune Diseases (ADs), marked by immune system dysfunction and self-targeting immune responses, can damage the auditory system, leading to symptoms such as tinnitus and sensorineural hearing loss. This study aimed to explore the prevalence rate, underlying mechanisms, assessment methods, and treatment of tinnitus in different ADs.

Recent Findings: This narrative review identified relevant articles through searching in Web of Science, Science Direct, PubMed, and Google Scholar databases, using keywords related to tinnitus (e.g., "Tinnitus", "Ringing") and ADs (e.g., "Autoimmune Disease", "Multiple Sclerosis", "Lupus"). This review found a significant prevalence of tinnitus across various ADs. Patients with Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease (AIED) exhibited the highest tinnitus prevalence (50–95.7%), followed by those with sarcoidosis (61%) and Susac's syndrome (54–77%). Systemic lupus erythematosus (6.7–44.4%), Sjögren's syndrome (10.1–41.7%), and multiple sclerosis (up to 30%) also showed notable tinnitus prevalence. The main mechanisms involve vasculitis affecting inner ear vessels, immune complex-mediated injury, demyelination of auditory pathways, and hair cell damage from ototoxic immunosuppressants (e.g., cyclosporine). Regarding tinnitus treatment, corticosteroids (e.g.,

prednisone) offer potential benefit, though symptom relief is often temporary. Biologic therapies (e.g., rituximab and adalimumab) have also shown varying degrees of success in specific cases.

Conclusion: Due to the significant prevalence of tinnitus in patients with ADs, it is recommended that relevant specialists consider incorporating hearing assessments, particularly those specific to tinnitus, into their evaluation protocols. This may facilitate earlier diagnosis and ultimately lead to more appropriate and timely management and rehabilitation strategies.

Keywords: Tinnitus; autoimmune diseases; hearing loss; vasculitis; hearing tests

Introduction

Autoimmune Diseases (ADs) are characterized by immune system dysfunction, leading to abnormal immune responses against the body's own tissues [1]. These diseases can affect nearly any organ, resulting in a wide range of complications from mild, easily overlooked issues to severe, life-threatening organ failure [1]. The occurrence of ADs can vary considerably, with estimates suggesting that they affect about 5-8% of individuals in developed countries [2]. ADs can be categorized into two main types: systemic and organ-specific. Systemic ADs, such as Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) and Multiple Sclerosis (MS), affect multiple organs throughout the body. In contrast, organ-specific ADs, such as autoimmune Ménière's disease and autoimmune inner ear disease, primarily target specific organs or systems [2, 3].

ADs can significantly affect the auditory system. These diseases damage inner ear structures (like the cochlea and vestibular system) via different immune responses, such as antibody- and complement-dependent cytotoxicity, cytotoxic T-cell activity, and immune complex-mediated injury [4]. This injury leads to auditory symptoms like hearing loss and tinnitus [3]. Prior research has identified various ADs that can affect the auditory system, including rheumatoid arthritis [5], lupus, Sjögren's syndrome, systemic sclerosis [6], granulomatosis with polyangiitis, Cogan's syndrome, Behçet's disease [7], sarcoidosis, antiphospholipid syndrome, Susac's syndrome, and MS [3]. Researchers have explored the link between ADs and Sensorineural Hearing Loss (SNHL). For instance, Di Stadio and Ralli found that 6–70% of patients with lupus experienced SNHL [8], while MacMahon and El Refaie reported a hearing loss prevalence of 1–23% in MS patients [9].

Tinnitus is the perception of a persistent sound in the ear or head without an external source [10]. It is often linked to hearing loss or somatosensory system activation [11]. This disorder is associated with numerous conditions, including age-related hearing loss, ototoxicity, infections, autoimmune diseases, sleep and cognitive disorders, and psychiatric illnesses [12]. Tinnitus affects about 14% of people globally, with 2% experiencing severe symptoms [13]. Chronic tinnitus can significantly impair quality of life, causing anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and stress [14]. Several studies highlight tinnitus prevalence in ADs. For instance, Matsuoka and Harris found that nearly all patients with Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease (AIED) experienced oscillatory hearing loss and 95.7% had tinnitus [15]. Kühn et al. reported hearing loss in 36% and tinnitus in 24% of patients suffering from Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis (GPA) [16]. Hardy et al. found that 93% of patients with Susac's syndrome experienced hearing loss and 54% had tinnitus at some point during their illness [17].

Tinnitus is evaluated using various methods. These include questionnaires like the Tinnitus Reaction Questionnaire (TRQ) measuring tinnitus-related distress, and the Tinnitus Handicap Inventory (THI) assessing the impact of tinnitus on daily life [18], as well as audiological tests such as audiometry, tinnitus-specific measures like pitch matching and frequency matching, high-frequency audiometry and the Transient Evoked Otoacoustic Emission (TEOAE) test evaluating hearing damage and cochlear health [19, 20]. Tinnitus management involves various approaches. Some immunosuppressants (e.g., adalimumab and rituximab) may reduce tinnitus [15]. Anti-anxiety drugs or steroids can also cause symptom relief. Additionally, auditory rehabilitation with hearing aids or sound maskers, along with behavioral interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), can enhance quality of life and reduce symptom severity [13].

While tinnitus assessment has advanced, the evidence for its risk factors and mechanisms is relatively limited, which can hinder effective treatment [21]. As mentioned above, ADs are among the factors contributing to tinnitus [3]. This study aimed to review existing research on the relationship between ADs and a higher risk of tinnitus and to investigate the underlying mechanisms of tinnitus and management strategies in the context of these autoimmune conditions. Given the significant heterogeneity in the existing literature—including varied study designs, diverse autoimmune conditions, and inconsistent outcome measures—a systematic review was not feasible. Therefore, a narrative review approach was chosen to allow for a broader synthesis of available evidence. A better understanding of tinnitus mechanisms in ADs can lead to more effective treatments for these patients.

By synthesizing this information, the results can highlight the importance of tinnitus evaluation in individuals with ADs, potentially assisting professionals in providing more targeted interventions and treatments.

Methods

This is a narrative review study. A literature search was conducted in PubMed, Web of Science, Science Direct, and Google Scholar for relevant studies published up to December 2025, using keywords related to tinnitus (Tinnitus, Ringing, and Buzzing) and various ADs, including SLE, Multiple Sclerosis, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Sjögren's syndrome, Susac's syndrome, Cogan's syndrome, Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis, Behçet's Disease, Vogt-Koyanagi-Harada Disease, autoimmune inner ear disease, and systemic sclerosis. We included studies that reported tinnitus prevalence in clinically diagnosed and confirmed patients with any type of ADs, without specifying the type or subtype of tinnitus. Studies were excluded if they did not provide data on tinnitus prevalence or if they did not assess patients with ADs. Based on the selection criteria, a total of 26 studies reporting tinnitus prevalence in ADs were finally included in the review.

Results

This review explored the association between ADs and tinnitus. The review of studies showed that tinnitus was prevalent, yet often overlooked, in patients with ADs. The occurrence of tinnitus varied based on the specific type of ADs, the extent of immune system involvement, and the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms. In this section, we present the current evidence regarding the prevalence, underlying mechanisms, diagnostic strategies, and therapeutic modalities for tinnitus in ADs. The findings are detailed for different ADs demonstrating the most significant and substantive data on tinnitus.

Autoimmune inner ear disease

AIED is a rare condition in which the body's immune system attacks the inner ear, leading to a progressive and typically bilateral SNHL that fluctuates and develops over weeks or months [22]. Tinnitus is highly prevalent in these patients, with reported rates ranging from 50% to 95.7% [15]. Bustos-Merlo et al. found that 56.25% (9 out of 16) patients with AIED reported tinnitus. SNHL was also present in 80-100% of patients, as a bilateral and progressive condition [23].

The underlying causes of tinnitus and hearing loss include immune complex deposition and vasculitis affecting inner ear vessels, leading to reduced blood flow and subsequent damage to hair cells [4, 7]. Furthermore, anti-HSP70 antibodies contribute to inflammation, potentially worsening the damage [24].

Corticosteroid therapy (60 mg of prednisone daily) demonstrated efficacy in 50-70% of cases, often leading to a reduction in tinnitus [25]. Biologic therapies, including adalimumab and rituximab, showed even greater improvement in tinnitus, with success rates ranging 70–100% [15]. Intratympanic injections also demonstrated hearing improvement in 50% of the cases [25]. Fioretti et al. used the THI in their study for evaluating the impact of tinnitus on AIED patients' quality of life. In one case, a patient with severe bilateral tinnitus (8 kHz, 15 dB above threshold) experienced successful management of their symptoms with bilateral broadband sound generators (8–9 h/day) [26]. However, the short-term treatment effects in this condition often require ongoing monitoring [22].

Systemic lupus erythematosus

SLE is a chronic AD involving the production of autoantibodies against nucleic acids, proteins, and other cellular components, affecting multiple organs, including the auditory system [8, 27]. Tinnitus prevalence in SLE patients varies, with reported rates of 6.7% [28], 32% [29], 35.8% [30], 40% [31], and 44.4% [32]. SNHL is also frequently observed, with reported prevalences ranging from 6 to 70% [8].

The underlying causes of tinnitus and hearing loss in SLE are multifactorial. Immune complex deposition in inner ear vessels leads to vasculitis and reduced blood flow. Additionally, the release of Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) and inflammatory cytokines contributes to direct damage to hair cells and ganglion cells [8].

Tinnitus may be worsened by anticardiolipin antibodies, which can lead to the formation of microthrombi in the cochlear vessels. Additionally, certain medications, such as hydroxychloroquine, can contribute to the exacerbation of tinnitus [31, 33]. Corticosteroids (such as prednisone at 1–1.5 mg/kg/day) are the primary treatment for SLE patients, often supplemented with rituximab to further reduce the severity of tinnitus [3, 8].

Vogt-Koyanagi-Harada disease

Vogt-Koyanagi-Harada (VKH) disease is a rare systemic AD characterized by granulomatous inflammation targeting melanocytes of the inner ear and other tissues [34]. Tinnitus is a frequent auditory symptom in VKH patients, with a reported prevalence ranging from 24% to 54% [35]. Al Dousary found that 42% of patients (10 out of 24) experienced tinnitus [34]. Similarly, studies conducted in Brazil reported tinnitus in 24% of patients (16 out of 67), while studies in Japan found a higher prevalence of 54% (74 out of 137) [35]. Ruiz-Allec et al. reported that 42.85% (9 out of 21 patients) had tinnitus, which was bilateral in 8 patients and unilateral in one patient [36]. In VKH patients, SNHL is also common, with a reported prevalence of 30-75% [35].

The underlying mechanism of tinnitus involves an autoimmune T-cell response targeting melanocytes in the stria vascularis, disrupting endocochlear potential generation [37]. Furthermore, the deposition of immune complexes and ROS intensifies cochlear inflammation, leading to tinnitus [35]. Increased interferon-gamma secretion also contributes to tinnitus in VKH patients by increasing the activity of auditory neurons [38].

Tinnitus assessment typically involves pure-tone audiometry, often revealing high-frequency involvement. Absent Otoacoustic Emissions (OAEs) in severe cases can further confirm cochlear damage [34, 39]. Systemic corticosteroids (e.g., prednisolone, 1–2 mg/kg/day) are the primary treatment approach [33], while immunosuppressive drugs (e.g., methotrexate) and intraocular steroids can also be effective in managing tinnitus [40].

Behçet's disease

Behçet's syndrome, characterized as chronic small vessel vasculitis, is a systemic AD with relapsing episodes [41]. In this syndrome, tinnitus prevalence varies. Karadağ et al. found that 27.3% (12 out of 44 patients) experienced tinnitus [20]. Kulahli et al. found that 11% (7 out of 65 patients) had tinnitus [42]. Tinnitus frequently co-occurs with hearing loss, and SNHL prevalence has been reported in 12-80% of cases [6, 40, 41].

The underlying mechanism of tinnitus involves vasculitis affecting the small vessels of the inner ear, leading to impaired blood supply to the cochlea [41]. Immune complex deposition and the production of ROS contribute to exacerbated inflammation and abnormal auditory neuron activity [7]. Furthermore, cytokines such as Tumor Necrosis Factor-alpha (TNF- α) and Interleukin-1 (IL-1) have been implicated in the pathogenesis of tinnitus [43]. The Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) and TRQ are frequently used to measure how tinnitus affects daily life in patients with Behçet's syndrome, with studies showing a strong correlation between the two assessment tools [20]. The VAS is a simple, reliable tool used to measure tinnitus severity by having patients rate their distress or annoyance on a 0-10 scale [18]. Cochlear damage, indicated by impaired TEOAE in 20.5% of patients with Behçet's syndrome, has been observed [20].

Treatments offer varying success rates; corticosteroids (like prednisolone) improved tinnitus in 44–70% of cases, while adalimumab completely eliminated it in one case [43]. Amantadine also demonstrated temporary reduction of tinnitus symptoms [44].

Multiple sclerosis

MS is an AD that causes inflammation and demyelination in the central nervous system, and can affect the auditory system [45]. Tinnitus is frequently reported in MS patients, with a prevalence of 19-30%, and reaching 100% in cases with sudden SNHL [9, 46, 47]. SNHL is another auditory problem seen in MS patients, with a prevalence of 0.4-23.3%, and it can develop suddenly or gradually [9, 47].

Tinnitus in MS is linked to demyelination within auditory pathways (including the eighth cranial nerve and brainstem), leading to irregular auditory neuron activity [3, 47]. Tinnitus can also be caused by autoimmune inflammation in the cochlea, which leads to the production of ROS and inflammatory substances like IL-1 β and TNF- α [45].

In MS patients, tinnitus is assessed using pure-tone audiometry and OAE evaluation, indicating cochlear damage in 34% of cases [45]. Corticosteroid treatment (methylprednisolone 1 g/day) could improve tinnitus and sudden SNHL in 77% of cases [47].

Sjögren's syndrome

Sjögren's syndrome, a chronic AD, causes dry eyes and mouth due to immune cell infiltration, and can affect the auditory-vestibular system [48, 49]. Tinnitus is frequently observed in individuals with Sjögren's syndrome, with studies reporting its occurrence in 10.1-41.7% of patients [49]. In these patients, tinnitus may be bilateral, constant or episodic, and commonly occurs along with hearing loss, vertigo, temporomandibular joint issues, or nerve

damage [49]. SNHL is another frequent auditory problem in Sjögren's syndrome, affecting 22.5–46% of patients [3].

The development of tinnitus is thought to involve the accumulation of immune complexes in the stria vascularis, leading to microvasculitis and reduced blood flow (ischemia) [49]. Furthermore, anticardiolipin antibodies and M3 muscarinic receptors (mAChRs) are believed to contribute to the progression of hearing loss, neurological issues, and tinnitus in these individuals [3]. The creation of ROS and inflammatory cytokines, including type I interferon, contributes to the damage of hair cells and the development of tinnitus [49, 50]. Hydroxychloroquine has the potential to worsen neurotoxicity, which can result in the sudden onset of tinnitus accompanied by headache and ataxia [51].

For managing tinnitus in Sjögren's syndrome, corticosteroids including prednisolone showed effectiveness in 44–70% of cases [33]. In cases with severe SNHL, hearing aids or cochlear implants are advised. CBT was also a recommended approach for managing the tinnitus [49].

Other autoimmune disorders

Tinnitus is also a frequently reported symptom in uncommon ADs that affect hearing, often occurring along with SNHL. Studies showed that tinnitus prevalence reached 80% in patients with Cogan's syndrome and 13% in children with this syndrome [52, 53]. Patients with systemic vasculitides such as GPA reported a tinnitus prevalence of 24–40% [16, 54]. Studies indicated a tinnitus prevalence of 54–77% in individuals with Susac's syndrome [17], 38% in those with rheumatoid arthritis [6], and 50% in patients with systemic sclerosis [55]. Lower rates of tinnitus were observed in dermatomyositis/polymyositis (16.1%) [56], while higher rates were seen in neurosarcoidosis (61%) [57], and Takayasu arteritis (49%) [30]. The underlying causes of tinnitus in these conditions are varied, involving processes such as vasculitis, the build-up of immune complexes, and inner ear ischemia [3]. Table 1 summarizes tinnitus and SNHL prevalence data for ADs reported in previous studies.

Discussion

This narrative review examined the prevalence of tinnitus in various ADs and explored the underlying mechanisms as well as evaluation and treatment methods of tinnitus in ADs. The results indicated a high occurrence of tinnitus in ADs such as AIED (50–95.7%) [15, 26], neurosarcoidosis (61%) [57] and Susac's syndrome (54–77%) [17]. However, tinnitus was less common in MS patients (< 30%) [46, 47]. The variability in tinnitus prevalence across different ADs likely reflects differences in the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms and the degree to which each disease directly affects the auditory system [58]. ADs such as AIED and Susac's syndrome usually involve direct cochlear or vestibulocochlear nerve damage, immune-mediated inner ear injury, or vasculitis affecting the cochlear microvasculature, leading to high tinnitus prevalence (50–95.7%) [4, 59]. These are primarily organ-specific ADs, where the immune response directly targets inner ear structures or adjacent vessels [4]. In contrast, systemic ADs (e.g. MS, Behçet's disease) affect the audio-vestibular system through less direct or less frequent mechanisms, such as central nervous system demyelination, systemic vasculitis, or indirect inflammatory effects, rather than primary cochlear damage [60]. This difference in underlying pathophysiology likely explains the lower and more variable tinnitus rates observed in systemic ADs such as MS [9, 45]. The ADs such as Flammer syndrome and Sweet syndrome had insufficient data for inclusion in this review [61, 62].

Tinnitus mechanisms in ADs often involve cochlear damage stemming from vasculitis (e.g., Cogan syndrome [63]), immune complex deposition (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis [64]), or demyelination (e.g. MS [47]). Furthermore, immunosuppressive drugs (e.g., cyclosporine and anti-TNF- α) can worsen tinnitus and SNHL via ototoxicity, disrupting the blood-inner ear barrier and damaging hair cells [65]. Taken together, autoimmune-mediated auditory dysfunction can be conceptualized as a multi-step process in which systemic autoimmunity initiates vascular, neural, or barrier injury in the inner ear [63]. These pathways converge in cochlear hair cell and auditory nerve damage, and secondary factors such as ototoxic immunosuppressants amplify injury [65]. The resulting disruption of cochlear homeostasis and abnormal neural signaling provides a mechanistic basis for tinnitus and SNHL in ADs. Clinically, tinnitus and SNHL can serve as early indicators of ADs, aiding in early diagnosis [7]. Recognizing these symptoms, particularly in ADs such as sarcoidosis and Cogan's syndrome, can lead to faster identification of the underlying disease and potentially prevent further damage to the auditory system [57, 63]. To our knowledge, this is the first narrative review to synthesize evidence on the association between ADs and tinnitus, providing an overview of tinnitus prevalence across different ADs. However, there were some limitations, including incomplete data for some ADs, methodological inconsistencies across studies, and a lack

of detailed information on tinnitus severity, treatment response, and relevant environmental or genetic factors. Additionally, some reported tinnitus cases may be confounded by medication-induced side effects rather than directly attributable to the primary autoimmune process itself. Many prevalence estimates come from small case series or case reports, contributing to heterogeneity in the available evidence. As a narrative review, our study did not apply a formal quality assessment or risk of bias tool, which is a recognized methodological limitation of this review type. Furthermore, our search was limited by a lack of access to certain databases. For future research, given the rarity of many ADs, large multicenter registry systems and collaborative research networks should be used to accumulate adequate sample sizes. Well-designed cross-sectional and prospective cohort studies are also needed to track tinnitus progression and identify variations across AD subtypes. Additionally, future studies should explore potential mechanisms linking specific ADs to tinnitus, including inflammatory, autoimmune, and vascular pathways.

Conclusion

Tinnitus is common in Autoimmune Diseases (ADs), with particularly high rates observed in Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease (AIED) and sarcoidosis. Vasculitis, immune complex-mediated injury, and demyelination, which often cause cochlear damage, are key mechanisms in these disorders. This review highlights the importance of clinician awareness regarding the association of tinnitus and sensorineural hearing loss with ADs, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive diagnostic and therapeutic approaches. Also, our findings emphasize the importance of audiologic evaluation and consideration of tinnitus management options in patients with ADs.

Ethical Considerations

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Authors' contributions

AD: Study design, interpretation of the results, and critical revision of the manuscript; MAS: Search and screening of papers, preparing the first draft; ZJ: Search and screening of papers, revision of the manuscript; AH: Study design and supervision, interpretation of the results, revision of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Table 1. Summary of reported prevalence (%) of tinnitus and sensorineural hearing loss in autoimmune diseases based on literature

Autoimmune disease	Tinnitus prevalence	SNHL prevalence
Systemic lupus erythematosus	6.7 [28]–44.4 [32]	6–70 [8]
Multiple sclerosis	<30 [9]	0.4–23.3 [45]
Sjogren's syndrome	10.1–41.7 [49]	5.6–54.17 [3]
Granulomatosis with polyangiitis	24–40 [16]	8–65 [16]
Systemic sclerosis	50 [55]	20–77 [55]
Behcet's disease	11 [42]–27.3 [20]	12 [41]–80 [42]
Susac's syndrome	54–77 [17]	37–97 [17]
Vogt-koyanagi-harada disease	24–54 [35]	30–75 [35]
Cogan's syndrome	13–80 [53]	31–65.2 [53]
Dermatomyositis/polymyositis	16.1 [56]	9.2 [56]
Rheumatoid arthritis	38 [6]	25–75 [64]
Sarcoidosis	61 [57]	90 [57]
Autoimmune inner ear disease	50 [23]–95.7 [15]	80–100 [22]

SNHL; sensorineural hearing loss