

Olympic athlete Katharine Merry is plagued by the agony of this ear condition

By **Jill Foster**

The deafening roar of a huge stadium crowd is one of Katharine Merry's favourite sounds in the world. Sports fans might assume that it is a poignant reminder of when she raced across the 400m finish line to win a bronze medal at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

But the real reason is more sobering. The 36-year-old British athlete and BBC presenter loves any kind of loud, sustained noise because it drowns out the distressing high-pitched whistle that plagues her life.

Six years ago, during a routine ear syringe, Katharine developed tinnitus – the name given to a condition in which sufferers hear noises that have no external source.

Often described as ringing, whistling, buzzing or humming, the noise can be heard in one or both ears – or it may be difficult to locate its exact position.

The sounds may be low, medium or high in frequency and can be constant or come and go.

It can be triggered by underlying problems such as diminished hearing, ear wax, high blood pressure and anxiety, but in many cases the cause is unknown – and there is no cure.

More than a third of adults will suffer it temporarily at some point in their lives but for about ten per cent of the population, it is a constant irritation. For an unlucky one per cent, it is so extreme that it affects their quality of life.

For Katharine, who lives with her partner Leon, 34, a recruitment manager in Solihull, the whistling is a permanent fixture she has learned to live with – but it has not been easy.

She says: 'I've been really depressed about it at times. To sleep at night, I have to have the television or music on in the background all the time to help me forget about it, and my moods suffer terribly.'

'My friends and family are supportive, but it took a good two years before I finally was able to live with it.'

Her problems began during a routine ear syringing – something she had been having every three months since she was in her late teens to get rid of earwax.

The process involves injecting water at body temperature through the nozzle of a syringe into the ear to dislodge the wax which is carried out of the ear canal by the continuous flow of water.

'I was born with particularly small ears and my ear canals get clogged with wax quickly,' she says. 'It wasn't a problem when I was a child and I could hear perfectly but as I got older I found that my hearing became impaired every few weeks because of the build-up.'

'As an athlete I was doing a lot of training in the swimming pool so maybe the water also had a part to play in blocking my ears.'

'In 2004, I went to my doctor and a new nurse performed the syringing.'

She was particularly vigorous and it felt uncomfortable.

Afterwards, I could hear a high-pitched whistle in my left ear – the kind you normally hear if you've been standing next to a speaker at a rock concert. I wasn't too worried, I thought it would go away. But that evening, when it still hadn't abated, I began to get anxious.'

As the days passed and the constant whistling was still present, Katharine revisited her GP who examined her ear but could see no debris or damage to the eardrum. In

desperation, she sought advice from two private doctors. But ear, nose and throat specialists in both Birmingham and London, who each performed MRI scans and ultrasounds, could find nothing wrong either.

'There's no damage to the skin or the eardrum and no blockage – it has got to be nerve damage and there's nothing you can do about that,' she says.

'I was concerned that the sound would get worse as I got older but the specialists say there's no reason

why it should. And apart from this whistling, my hearing is perfect. The only time it gets worse is when I'm tired or overworked or when I've been flying. Then it only gets louder – it doesn't change in tone or sound.'

Her job as a BBC sports presenter means she often has to wear an earpiece

I loved the roar of the crowd – it drowned out my tinnitus



LOUD AND CLEAR: Tinnitus sufferer Katharine Merry at the Sydney Games. Above: As a BBC presenter

so she can hear her producer in the studio. 'If possible, I'll wear it in my right ear but sometimes the engineer says I have to put it in my left. Usually there's so much sound coming through the earpiece that it distracts me from the whistling,' she says.

'The only real problem is that my ears are small, so I have to have a special earpiece moulded for me. I took it to the man who makes Kylie Minogue's earpieces who said that I have even smaller ears than her – and she's about five inches shorter than me.'

Although there is no medication to treat tinnitus, cognitive behavioural therapy can help the sufferer to cope and relax – there is a theory that everyone hears these noises, but some individuals become fixated with them.

Apart from the noise of the stadium, Katharine has found another form of relief.

'On my travels in America I came across a little device that is like a small blue balloon and which you fill up with warm water so you can syringe your own ears,' she says.

'It's very easy to use and eases the tinnitus slightly each time I do it.'

'I'd be reluctant to get my ears syringed professionally after what happened, so this little balloon goes all over the world with me.'

DOCTOR DOCTOR

Q How long should I have a mild headache before seeing a GP?

A Any unusual headaches should be discussed with your doctor. Certainly a week of mild headache would warrant a visit.

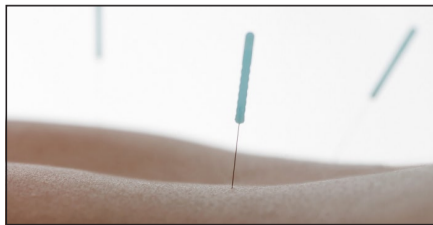
Doctor Heal Thyself



Professor Cathy Warwick, CBE, 58, is general secretary of the Royal College of Midwives. She lives in London with husband Richard, 60, an oil company manager. They have three children, Bruce, 20, Katie, 25, and Lucy, 27.

ACUPUNCTURE

I once tried acupuncture for an extremely sore back in Hong Kong and it was fantastic, so there is a place for alternative medicine. I've never been ill, really, but if I were I wouldn't mind starting off with homeopathic remedies, and moving on to conventional medicine if those didn't work. My greatest health worry isn't illness – it's an injury that prevents me exercising.



BAN THE TELLY

I was brought up on three meals a day with few snacks, and I played outside rather than watching television, so I was never ill. Also, my father was a GP so I wasn't allowed to be. One day I hurt my arm and walked around like a bird with a broken wing for a week before he took me to hospital. He was rather embarrassed when the X-ray showed it was broken in two places.

SMOKING STUNTS LIVES

My dear, heavy-smoking brother suddenly died this summer of smoking-related cancer, aged 55. I was terribly anti-smoking even before that, especially for pregnant women. Smoking stunts babies' growth and increases the likelihood of premature birth, both of which are dangerous.

WORK CURES STRESS

My Scottish protestant background says you that just have to get on with it in times of trouble. So if I've got too much work, I get up early and work through it. If there's something that I need to talk about, I rant and rave to my friends rather than going to see a counsellor.

EAT FOR ONE – NOT TWO

Ignore the myth of eating for two in pregnancy. If you already eat sensibly, you need hardly alter your diet. Gain too much weight and high blood pressure, diabetes or post-partum haemorrhage will be more likely, and it's hard to lose later. Keep exercising: staying fit is beneficial.

