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For the Fun of it: Hiccups!

We all get them – hiccups (or hiccoughs). In fact, almost *all* mammals get them. But what exactly *is* a hiccup?

Neurologically, hiccups are an unthinking reflex, like the kicking action of your leg when a doctor taps your knee. A hiccup is a two-step process. Step one is an involuntary muscle spasm that causes you to suck in lots of air. Step two is a nearly immediate closure of your airways that blocks that air, causing a 'hiccup' noise.

Interesting Hiccup Facts

- **The medical term for 'the hiccups' is singultus.** Singultus is a Latin word for the act of catching one's breath while crying.
- **Ultrasounds show that even fetuses have hiccups.** This may perhaps be a way to prepare the fetus for breathing once it is born by exercising its muscles.
- **Infants hiccup more than other humans.**
- **Nobody knows for sure why hiccups exist.** Some think it may be a holdover from our deep evolutionary past.
 - **Get this...** some scientists argue that the source of hiccups is left over from the fact that, deeper in our evolutionary history, these muscles were meant to control our fishy ancestor's gills, which were much closer to the brain stem. The second idea concerns the

closing of the airways. Many scientists think this is a holdover from our amphibious ancestors, who would need a quick reaction to prevent water from entering its lungs when switching between gill breathing and lung breathing. ***Who would have thought?***

- **Nobody is completely sure how the hiccup reflex is triggered**, and the cause may differ in different people. But a common explanation is that it starts with irritation or stimulation of the phrenic or vagus nerves, and perhaps other nerves in the autonomic nervous system. The phrenic nerve leads from the brain to the diaphragm. The vagus nerve travels from the brain to the ear, throat, and many parts of the chest and abdomen including our most critical organs.
- **Many effective home remedies result in more CO₂ in the bloodstream**. Raising the CO₂ levels in your bloodstream actually increases its acidity. This results in the release of calcium ions in the blood. The calcium ions can block some of the activity of the nervous system, which can serve to relax or block muscle spasms including hiccups.
- **The individual with the longest attack of hiccups**, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, was an American, Charles Osborne (1894-1991) whose hiccups lasted **68 years!**

Things that may trigger hiccups

- Eating too much
- Eating too fast
- Drinking alcohol
- Drinking carbonated beverages
- Swallowing too much air when chewing gum
- Stress

When to see a physician

Hopefully, there are a rare few of us that would need to see a physician due to our hiccups; however, there could be an underlying medical issue or medication reaction behind your diaphragm spasms. See your physician if your hiccups:

- Last longer than 48 hours, or
- Return often and are affecting your life

The only approved prescribed medication for hiccups is chlorpromazine.

Homegrown Hiccup Remedies!

We canvassed the BCPVPA staff to learn about their own favourite hiccup remedies:

- **Sharon** swears by the tried-and-true shot of vinegar. It is believed that vinegar stimulates the transient receptor potential (TRP) channels in the mouth and by activating these receptors, we overwhelm the muscle contractions that lead to hiccups.
- **Emily** says her go-to is to drink water upside down from the far side of the glass while plugging your ears. (I asked Emily to demonstrate how she does this with only two hands. I laughed so hard I almost *GAVE* myself hiccups!)
- **Sandra** shared that her family remedy is a series of co-breathing maneuvers with a loved one. Take several progressive deep inhales, filling your lungs and holding at the top; expelling the breath in a dramatic fashion, and repeating this two or three times. Then, a series of rapid deep inhales and exhales, maybe five of them. Sandra went on to say that "It's pretty effective – but you have to do the co-breathing, as I think the absurdity of staring at each other hopefully as you breathe adds to the drama, and takes your mind off the hiccups."
- **Carmen and Nick** drink from the far side of the glass while tipping the glass away from you. Nick told me that he uses this remedy every time, but it doesn't usually work. He believes it is "just this convoluted difficult activity that takes up enough focus and effort that it distracts you from your hiccups enough for them to go away."
- **Andrea's** family remedy was to hold your breath and hop on one foot.
- **Magdalena** said that their family trick is to drink a glass of water backwards (carefully over the sink!), and the trick is to take 7 quick but complete sips. Another remedy her family has used is a specific pressure point on the back.
- **I** have successfully used, on myself and others, a pressure point: the left hand between the knuckle and the wrist, between the ligaments of the pinkie and ring finger. Press hard there until the hiccups subside.

Other remedies found online (*which may or may not be scientifically proven!*):

- **Breathing and posture techniques:** Sometimes, a change in your breathing or posture can relax your diaphragm.
- **Practice measured breathing.** Disrupt your respiratory system with slow, measured breathing. Breathe in for a count of five, and out for a count of five.
- **Hold your breath.** Inhale a large breath of air and hold it for about 10 to 20 seconds, then breathe out slowly. Repeat as necessary.
- **Breathe into a paper bag.** Place a paper lunch bag over your mouth and nose. Slowly breathe in and out, deflating and inflating the bag. *Never use a plastic bag.*
- **Hug your knees.** Sit down in a comfortable place. Bring your knees to your chest and lean forward. This also compresses the chest by putting pressure on the diaphragm.

- **Use the Valsalva maneuver.** Exhale while pinching your nose and keeping your mouth closed.

Pressure Points: Pressure points are areas of your body that are particularly sensitive to pressure. Applying pressure to these points with your hands may help to relax your diaphragm or stimulate your vagus or phrenic nerves.

- **Pull on your tongue.** Grab the tip of your tongue and gently pull it forward once or twice.
- **Squeeze your nose.**
- **Massage your carotid artery gently.** This artery is what you feel when you check your pulse by touching your neck. Lie down, turn your head to the left, and massage the artery on the right side in a circular motion for 5 to 10 seconds.
- **Jaw point.** Place your pointer finger in the small indent behind your jawbone, just below your ear lobe. Gently press your finger toward your jawbone for 1 to 2 minutes as you focus on deep breathing. Release. This point should feel tender but not painful.

Things to eat or drink: Eating certain things, or changing the way you drink, may also help to stimulate your vagus or phrenic nerves.

- **Drink or gargle ice water.** Gargling or slowly sipping cold water may help stimulate the vagus nerve.
- **Suck on an ice cube.** Suck on the ice cube for a few minutes, then swallow it once it shrinks to a reasonable size.
- **Eat some sugar.** Put a pinch of granulated sugar on your tongue and let it sit for 5 to 10 seconds, then swallow.
- **Suck on a lemon.** Some people add a bit of salt to a lemon slice. Rinse your mouth with water to protect your teeth from citric acid.

While a little embarrassing and inconvenient, hiccups are usually minor and short-lived. But next time you get them, enjoy a quick internal chuckle about this bizarre body experience, and try out one of the many suggested 'remedies' to see if one works for you!

Sources:

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<https://www.healthline.com/health/how-to-get-rid-of-hiccups#methods-for-getting-rid-of-hiccups>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.