

Hiccups

► PROBLEM

It's the big one—the sales presentation that will make or break your career—when suddenly *hic . . . cup! hic . . . cup!* You continue. But that squeaky *hic* returns, this time louder. You wonder, “Why now? And what the heck are hiccups anyway?” Hiccups are a result of your diaphragm throwing a spastic fit. That's the muscle separating your chest from your abdomen. The irksome *hic* sound comes from the air you quickly suck in, which gets cut off suddenly by your closing vocal cords. And that jerky head-and-neck action? That's just a by-product of your trembling diaphragm.

It sounds scary, but hiccups are basically harmless. They serve no purpose except to make you look and sound ridiculous. More men than women suffer from them for unknown reasons. Most guys will hiccup less than 7 times or more than 63 times in a single bout, usually at a rate of 4 to 60 per minute. Then the hiccups disappear.

► CAUSE

Just about anything can set them off. Drinking alcohol, chugging carbonated beverages, wolfing down too much food, emotional stress, sudden excitement, indigestion, or a sudden change in body temperature can trigger spasms.

► HOW SERIOUS

In extremely rare cases, hiccups can persist for hours or days at a time and recur over many weeks, months, and even years, causing insomnia, fatigue, depression, dehydration, and weight loss. So if your hiccups linger for more than 48 hours or recur for a month or more, see your doctor, advises Steven Shay, M.D., a gastroenterologist at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Chronic hiccups indicate that you may have a more serious medical problem such as diabetes or

DO THIS NOW

Grab a tall glass of cold water and take several quick sips without stopping, says Steven Shay, M.D., a gastroenterologist at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. If your hiccups persist, repeat four or five times.

History Lesson

While slaughtering a hog one day in 1922, Charles Osborne of Anthon, Iowa, developed a case of the hiccups. This is kind of like saying that Bill Gates developed a taste for money. For the next 67 years and five months until February 1990, Osborne hiccuped every 1½ seconds. He passed away, presumably hiccup-free at last, in 1991.

kidney disease. Once your illness is treated, your hiccups should cease, says Dr. Shay. But if an underlying disease is not the problem, your doctor can prescribe medications to control them, he says.

► SOLUTIONS

Hear no evil. Stick an index finger in each ear. The theory is that you'll stimulate the branch of your vagus nerve that goes to the middle ear. The vagus nerve is believed to be a major player in the hiccup cycle and, if stimulated, the hiccups may cease, says James H. Lewis, M.D., associate professor of medicine in the division of gastroenterology at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C. This is one of many “cures” that have come down through the ages and are still used today, Dr. Lewis says.

Open a jar of Jif. Another way to stop a hiccup attack is to try swallowing a teaspoon of peanut butter, which stimulates the vagus nerve fibers in the throat, says Dr. Lewis.

Use a scare tactic. A longtime favorite is to get someone to scare the living daylight out of you when you least expect it. So how does it work? “If you gasp when you're startled, it disrupts your respiratory rhythm and the hiccups may cease,” explains Dr. Lewis.

Raid the candy dish. Try sucking on a piece of hard candy. The effect is similar to swallowing a spoonful of sugar, which stimulates the vagus nerve fibers in the throat, explains Dr. Lewis.

Brown-bag it. Place one hand around the opening of a paper bag. Then deeply inhale and exhale into the small opening for 60 seconds. “Breathing in your own breath increases the carbon dioxide level in your blood, which may break the hiccup cycle,” says Dr. Shay.

Get waterlogged. Drink a tall (12-ounce) glass of cold water without stopping. The combination of gulping without breathing should interrupt those spastic rhythms, Dr. Shay says. Or you can try to drink upside down from the far side of the glass. “The mental wrangling that goes into figuring this out is enough to give your hiccups the boot,” adds Dr. Lewis.

Play a gag. If none of the above remedies work, stick your finger down

your throat and gag. "I find this retching maneuver to be the best. It's a strong-enough stimulus to short-circuit the hiccup reflex," Dr. Shay says. Stop short of actually throwing up, however.

▶ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Press your pinkie. Firmly squeeze the middle joint of your pinkie finger while exhaling for five seconds. Let off the pressure while inhaling for five seconds. Repeat for about two minutes or until your hiccups go away. "This acupressure technique will help relax your stomach nerves to the point where your hiccups can disappear," says David J. Nickel, a doctor of Oriental medicine and a licensed acupuncturist in Santa Monica, California, and author of *Acupressure for Athletes*.

Get hot and bothered. Put a teaspoon of grated fresh ginger and a teaspoon of sugar into a four-ounce cup of boiling water. Squeeze the juice of half a lemon into the cup, let it cool, and drink slowly. "The tangy taste will more than likely jolt you out of the hiccups," says James A. Duke, Ph.D., the world's foremost authority on healing herbs and author of *The Green Pharmacy*. You can also eat a cracker spread with hot mustard to send your hiccups packing.

Eat some gentian. Gentian is a bitter herb that you can buy in many health food stores. It's also known as *Gentiana lutea*. Dribble a few drops of the gentian tincture (the alcoholic extract of the root) on a lemon wedge and suck. "The bitter taste stimulates gastric juices in your stomach, which will improve digestion. So your hiccups will likely take a hike," Dr. Duke says.

Caution: Taking more than four milliliters of gentian tincture a day may cause nausea and vomiting. Gentian is not recommended for people who have high blood pressure, a gastric or duodenal ulcer, or gastric irritation and inflammation.

▶PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Swig less booze. Chugging beer or slinging shots with your buddies can trigger hiccups faster than you can catch a buzz. The reason is that "alcohol depletes zinc and other nutrients essential for proper digestion," Dr. Nickel says. "Zinc is a mineral that also calms your nerves. So without it, your digestive system won't work properly and the nerves responsible for fueling hiccups will become irritated."

Don't gorge yourself. Stop eating when you feel full. "Overloading your stomach can irritate your phrenic and vagus nerves that lead to your diaphragm," Dr. Nickel says. And the end result? *Hic . . . cup!*