Why Do We Hiccup?

**Last updated:** Mon 22 September 2014

Most of us have experienced hiccups, an uncomfortable, sometimes embarrassing, but usually short-lived experience. But sometimes hiccups persist for a long period of time and can be a sign of serious underlying disease.

**What are hiccups?**

Hiccups are bursts of inspiratory (breathing in) activity. The muscles we use when we take in a breath are the intercostal muscles situated between the ribs, and the diaphragm - a sheet of muscle below the lungs.

Most simple cases of hiccups come after eating or drinking too much or too quickly. The stomach, which is situated right below the diaphragm, becomes distended and irritates it. This will cause the diaphragm to contract, as it does when we breathe in.

**Why do hiccups occur?**

Sometimes hiccups will occur because of a disturbance to the nerve pathways from the brain to the muscles involved. This explains why hiccups may occur with temperature changes or emotional situations. It is also the reason that a sudden shock can sometimes abolish an attack.

Persistent hiccups may signify problems in the brain, spinal cord or any of the structures around the diaphragm or chest wall.

Everyone has their own pet remedy for curing hiccups. Simply holding your breath is often effective. Breathing into a paper bag, the best remedy, increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the lungs, relaxing the diaphragm and halting the spasms.

**Learn more**

We have two other article dedicated to hiccups. You can learn more about what hiccups are ([articles/181573.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/181573.php)) or discover the best ways to get rid of them ([articles/9896.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/9896.php)).