

Introduction

A hiccup is an involuntary movement of the diaphragm. The diaphragm is the muscle at the base of the lungs. The movement is followed by quick closure of the vocal cords, which produces the "hic" sound you make. Hiccups usually are not serious. But rarely, ongoing hiccups can be a sign of a medical problem.

This reference summary explains hiccups. It covers causes of hiccups, as well as diagnosis and treatment options.

What are Hiccups?

All hiccups start with the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle that sits below the lungs. When you breathe in, the diaphragm pulls down. This helps pull air into the lungs. When you breathe out, the diaphragm relaxes. Air then flows out of the lungs and back out through the nose and mouth.

Hiccups can happen when the diaphragm becomes irritated. If this happens, the diaphragm pulls down in a jerky way. This makes you suck air into your throat, causing the air to hit your voice box. The result is called a hiccup. You may also experience a slight tightening sensation in the chest, abdomen or throat before a hiccup.



Almost all cases of the hiccups last only a few minutes. Contact your health care provider if your hiccups last for more than a few days. Hiccups that last a long time can be serious. They can interfere with eating, sleeping and breathing. This can lead to a lack of nutrition and exhaustion.

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Causes

Many things can irritate the diaphragm and cause hiccups. Some of these include:

- Drinking alcohol or carbonated beverages.
- Eating hot or spicy foods.
- Eating large meals.

Other possible causes of hiccups include:

- Excitement or emotional stress.
- Sudden temperature changes.

Hiccups may also start and stop for no obvious reason.

If hiccups last longer than 48 hours, there may also be other causes, such as an underlying medical condition. The most common cause of long-term hiccups is damage to or irritation of the nerves that lead to the diaphragm.



Nerves that lead to the diaphragm may be damaged or irritated by:

- A tumor or other abnormal growth in the neck.
- Acid reflux.
- Something in the ear touching the eardrum.
- Sore throat.

Damage to the brain can also cause long-term hiccups. Damage may be due to:

- Inflammation of the brain or the tissues surrounding the brain.
- Multiple sclerosis, or MS.
- Stroke.
- Tumors.
- Traumatic brain injury.

MS is a disease that affects your brain and spinal cord. It damages the material that surrounds and protects your nerve cells. This damage slows down or blocks messages between your brain and your body. Strokes happen when blood flow to your brain stops. Within minutes, brain cells begin to die. A stroke is a medical emergency.



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Other possible causes of hiccups include:

- Diabetes.
- Kidney failure.
- Taking certain medicines, such as steroids.

Diagnosis

Most cases of hiccups only last a few minutes. If this is the case, you do not need to consult a health care provider. You should talk to your health care provider if your hiccups last more than a few days. This can be a sign of an underlying medical condition. Your health care provider will first ask about your medical history and symptoms. A physical exam will be performed. Your doctor may run blood tests.

Imaging tests may also be done. These tests can show if there is an abnormality with the nerves or abdomen. The tests may include:

- Chest x-rays.
- CT scan.
- MRI.



A CT scan is an x-ray machine linked to a computer. A CT scan takes a series of detailed pictures of your organs. An MRI uses strong magnets to create images of the inside of the body. In some cases, an endoscopy may be done. This test involves using a thin, lighted tube inserted into the mouth and down the throat. This can check for problems with the trachea, or windpipe.

Other tests may also be needed. Talk to your health care provider to learn more.

Treatment

Most cases of hiccups go away on their own. If a medical condition is causing your hiccups, treatment for that illness may get rid of the hiccups.

There is no sure way to stop a short episode of hiccups. You can try:

- Breathing into a paper bag.
- Drinking or sipping a glass of cold water.
- Holding your breath.

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For long-term hiccups, treatment may include:

- Medicines.
- Surgery.
- Other medical procedures.

A variety of medicines can be used to treat long-term hiccups. Talk to your health care provider about the different types of medicines available and which one could work best for you.

In some cases, surgery may be done to place a battery-operated device in the chest. This device delivers mild electrical stimulation to the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve goes from the brainstem to the neck, and then down to the chest and abdomen. It carries messages from the brain to the body's major organs, including the diaphragm.



Your health care provider may also recommend an injection of an anesthetic near the phrenic nerve. The phrenic nerve passes from the neck down to the diaphragm. The injection can block your phrenic nerve to stop hiccups. An anesthetic is a medicine that numbs the area where it is injected. It allows a person to be pain-free temporarily.

Summary

A hiccup is an involuntary movement of the diaphragm. The diaphragm is the muscle at the base of the lungs. The movement is followed by quick closure of the vocal cords, which produces the "hic" sound you make. Hiccups can happen when the diaphragm becomes irritated, such as by eating large meals or foods that are spicy. Hiccups may also start and stop for no obvious reason.



Most cases of hiccups go away on their own. You can try breathing into a paper bag, drinking a glass of cold water or holding your breath. If an underlying medical condition is causing your hiccups, treatment of that illness may eliminate the hiccups. Hiccups usually are not serious. But rarely, ongoing hiccups can be a sign of a medical problem. Contact your health care provider if your hiccups last for more than a few days.

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