Dear Alice,

What causes people to have the hiccups?

Answer

Dear Reader,

From holding your breath to drinking cold water, many people have tactics to get rid of the hiccups. But asking the question of what causes them in the first place can be a good place to start! Hiccupping happens when the diaphragm involuntarily contracts. The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle that separates the chest cavity from the abdomen, and it plays a key role in breathing. This contraction of the diaphragm then causes an immediate and brief closure of the vocal cords, which produces the characteristic sound of a hiccup.

Attacks of the hiccups seem to be associated with a few different causes:

- Eating too much or drinking carbonated beverages
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Being excited or stressed
- Swallowing air with chewing gum or hard candy
- Sudden changes in temperature

_List adapted from Mayo Clinic_ [2].

In some rare cases, hiccups may last more than 48 hours and may be attributable to a variety of other factors. These include nerve damage or irritation, central nervous system disorders, metabolic disorders, and drugs (whether used for medicinal or recreational purposes). Common to each of these categories is irritation to the diaphragm or disruption in the mechanisms that typically control the hiccup reflex. Getting in touch with a health care provider for hiccups that last more than 48 hours is recommended to explore any of these potential causes further.

For the most part, hiccups aren't significant or serious in any medical sense. Most bouts of the hiccups are brief, even though when you have the hiccups, they seem to last forever. In the
rarest of all cases, an attack of the hiccups can last for a very long time and lead to exhaustion. When this happens, it's possible that the person needs medical attention in order to paralyze the diaphragm and stop the hiccupping. Luckily, most cases of the hiccups can be cured just by holding your breath!

Alice!
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