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What your constant yawning could mean

When the Rolling Stones sang '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction', I don't think they were referring to yawning. But we all know how satisfying a good yawn can be. One poster to our forums complained that her urge to yawn was bordering on excessive though. So let's explore what could cause such a phenomenon.

FlutterbyPie posted that for a few days she felt the need to yawn or take a deep breath every few minutes.. She felt the same urge throughout the day, whether she was tired or not. She wasn't particularly stressed about anything. But she had had a similar episode earlier in the year, which lasted for about two months.

Why do we yawn?

Linda83143I reminded us of the popular belief that yawning occurs when the brain needs more oxygen. In fact, recent research suggests that yawning - a wide opening of the mouth, an involuntary intake of breath, and a short breathing out - occurs when the main source of stimulation in a person's environment is no longer able to sustain their attention. We call this boredom.

"For the past few days, I've been yawning a lot, much more than average. If I'm not yawning, I'm breathing in as deep as I can to get similar "satisfaction"."

Source: FlutterbyPie

Boredom induces drowsiness when the brain activates the sleep generating system. Tests on oxygen levels of people before and after they yawn show no change, and it's suggested that the reason for yawning is actually to cool the brain down.

[Other research](#) suggests that contagious yawning (yawning when you see another person yawn) is related to activation of the amygdala area (a group of cells low down on the side of the brain). Quite what this has to do with FlutterbyPie's problem, I'm not sure. But it does demonstrate what a complex activity yawning is.

The good news is that by and large excessive yawning is not a sign of any serious medical condition. Rarely, it can be associated with [epilepsy](#), [multiple sclerosis](#), or [stroke](#). Unless you want to get me drummed out of the GP Brownies, please don't think you have any of these illnesses just because you get excessive yawning; my advice to you is to read our associated leaflets and only seek medical advice if the yawning is associated with other features of these conditions.

Hungry for air

Mohammed76229 described FlutterbyPie's need to breathe deeply as 'air hunger' and this is a very good description. He also called it pseudo-dyspnoea, which means false shortness of breath. This term is used when a person's [breathlessness](#) isn't due to heart or lung disorders or any other demonstrable physical problem. It often gets better with exercise, which is the complete reverse of true dyspnoea, which improves with rest. Melijohn and Kimberley56074 also used the term chronic hyperventilation syndrome, which refers to a long-term condition in which the person breathes too deeply or too rapidly.

So what can be done about all this? Some of our posters thought allergy played a part. Gdepac was helped by a milk-free diet and wondered if it was all to do with mucus in the respiratory system. Michele29956 benefited from decongestant tablets. Others, such as Jenna03097 and Joe93888 wondered whether [gastro-oesophageal reflux disease](#) (GORD) or [hiatus hernia](#) was a cause. They were helped by measures to reduce acid reflux, such as antacids, acid suppression medication such as [omeprazole](#), and raising the head-end of the bed.

Jwarner75 found that cutting down on coffee helped the hyperventilation. It's worth a try. Although, scientists have found that caffeine stimulates the arousal system, so this could make the yawning worse!

When to worry

Inevitably, with all this talk of breathing, [asthma](#) raised its ugly head. However, Jennifer26058 and several other posters found asthma inhalers unhelpful and tests for asthma were normal. Rachel66304 knew what asthma felt like, and this wasn't it.

Lann412 had read about air hunger being a feature of anaemia and wondered whether iron tablets would help. However, John01128 said he had this problem and his iron levels were fine. He counselled against taking iron tablets unless his doctor diagnosed iron deficiency with a blood test. You won't be surprised that I agree with him!

Matt13703 and diana1227 found treatment from a chiropractor helpful. Sandeepk benefited from homeopathy. And Sarah3006 swore by raw ginger. None of these have any medical science behind them but my attitude as ever is that if people have found conventional medicine unhelpful, and alternative medicine has something to offer, give it a try (providing it doesn't do you any harm).

Breathing exercises to try

Some posts I found fascinating focused on attempts to alter the patterns of breathing. Jean88823 pointed out that breathing was an involuntary activity and if the mind started to concentrate on the activity of the chest muscles moving air in and out of the lungs this could become an obsession. She suggested imagining an 'automatic breathing switch' which you turned on to let the body do its own thing, while your brain went off to do something else. Aaron60198 also recommended distraction as a way of reducing symptoms.

Julie19986 had been helped by diaphragm exercises and Diana88467 recommended concentrating on using your abdominal muscles to breathe. Josephine 30311 pointed out that there were several YouTube videos which demonstrated this.

Bob17029 felt that psychological problems such as [anxiety](#) were often a cause, and that by altering the pattern of breathing, you were changing the balance between the oxygen you breathed in and the carbon dioxide you breathed out, which just aggravated the feeling that you are not getting enough air. Psychological problems such as anxiety and depression featured frequently, although Michelle29956 and several other posters found anti-anxiety medicines such as [benzodiazepines](#) unhelpful. These are in any case meant for short-term use as there is a considerable risk of dependency.

The poster who people found the most helpful seemed to be Will71922, who recounted his experiences with the [Buteyko breathing technique](#). Although intended for asthma and [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease](#), many posters with air hunger and excessive yawning found this helpful.

Clearly, it's a big problem (280 posters and counting). Many people were unimpressed by the help they got from the medical profession: I think this just reflects the fact that doctors need to increase their knowledge base about the link between the brain and the lungs and the body systems that control breathing and yawning. There are probably several factors involved, both psychological and physical, and we are not going to get a 'one size fits all' solution.

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