

The fascinating history of hiccups

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Credit: Florida International University

If you've ever had a friend try to scare your hiccups away, you know how annoying and useless it is. A few years ago, it even proved deadly for a Texas man when a buddy who claims he was just trying to startle the victim out of a case of the hiccups actually shot and killed him!

There are plenty of old home remedies for curing hiccups: stick your tongue out, spin in circles, suck on a lemon. Those may sound silly until you hear some of the treatments suggested over the years by some of medicine's most brilliant minds: sneezing, vomiting, pulling of the tongue, swallowing ice, pressure on the eye ball, rectal massage, sexual intercourse.

"While some of these methods sound strange, what they were trying to accomplish is vagal stimulation. The vagus nerve is involved in the hiccup reflex and therefore, some of this stuff actually makes sense," says Professor Georg Petroianu of the Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine.

Petroianu, chair of the department of cellular biology and pharmacology, is an expert on hiccups and has published several papers and book chapters on the subject.

At a recent lunch-time lecture, Hiccups: from womb to tomb, he regales with a colorful brief history of the condition known in medical terms as "singultus"— an involuntary contraction of the diaphragm (the muscle that separates your chest from your abdomen), followed by the sudden closure of the vocal chords, which produces the "hic" sound.



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Common causes include eating too much or drinking cold carbonated beverages too quickly. More rare documented causes range from ants in the ear canal to brain damage.

"Hiccup is not a diagnosis, it's not a disease. It is a symptom," Petroianu tells his audience of mostly medical students. "And we all have them, even before we are born." Petroianu says fetal hiccups are quite common.

He recites a who's who of famous hiccups sufferers, among them Pope Pius XII, Marco Polo, and John F. Kennedy, whose physician administered the traction of the tongue treatment. Then there was the man who became famous because of his hiccups—Charles Osborne, an Iowa farmer, holds the world's record for 68 years of continuous hiccuping.

Fortunately, most bouts of hiccups last only a few minutes. Petroinau suggests you call your doctor if home remedies don't work and the hiccups last more than a day.

Today, chronic hiccups are usually treated with medication, but there is still no definitive cure.

Provided by Florida International University

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