

LIVE Healthy

← You may worry that your body is this loud—but odds are no one else hears it.

What's That Sound?

Your insides might be trying to tell you something. Decode every snap, crackle and burp with this guide to which body noises are normal—and which ones aren't.

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Nose constantly whistling? A doc will check for polyps: benign (and treatable!) growths.

YOUR NOSE

WHISTLING is a sign of airflow obstruction and may mean excess mucus is lining your nasal passages. Clear things out with a decongestant (if you've got a cold) or an antihistamine (for allergies). **WHEN TO WORRY** If you suffered a nasal trauma, whistling may indicate a tear in the cartilage between the nostrils, repairable by an ENT or plastic surgeon.

SNEEZING may be triggered by anything from a virus to bright lights, which can stimulate a reflex response running from the brain to the diaphragm. Some folks' achoos are louder because of the volume of their lungs, size of their trachea or strength of their abs. **WHEN TO WORRY** Chronic attacks may warrant allergy testing.

➔ **FROM THE RUMBLING IN** your tummy to the popping of a joint, the human body produces a curious symphony of sounds. Most are perfectly normal (if slightly embarrassing). But in some cases, they can be alarm bells. "It's the context that helps you figure out if a particular noise is worrisome," explains internist Kurt Hafer, MD, clinical assistant professor of medicine at Stanford School of Medicine. Here, Dr. Hafer and other experts reveal when a gurgle, burp, queef or toot is a cause for concern—or just a giggle.

YOUR EARS

WHOOSHING that you hear when you're lying with your head on a pillow could be blood moving through your carotid artery and jugular vein, which run behind your ear. The sound becomes noticeable when external noise is blocked, says Anil Lalwani, MD, vice chair for research in the department of otolaryngology at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. Whooshing you hear 24/7 may be due to an

infection or allergies. Congestion in your eustachian tube, which connects your nose and throat to the middle ear, also muffles external sounds; it should clear on its own or with the help of an antibiotic or decongestant. **WHEN TO WORRY** Whooshing without obstructed hearing could mean a blood vessel blockage or abnormality; call your doc.



RINGING in one or both ears is known as tinnitus. Infections, aging and very loud noise can damage hair cells in the inner ear that translate sound waves into electrical signals. The result: "Your cochlea sends signals to the brain even when no sound waves come in," Dr. Lalwani explains. **WHEN TO WORRY** If a phantom sound lasts more than two days or is accompanied by pain or vertigo, see a doctor for tests to rule out infection or neurological issues.

YOUR THROAT

BELCHING is the sound of air escaping your stomach. No surprise—it's usually a result of swallowing air, notes Claudia Gruss, MD, a gastroenterologist

at ProHealth Physicians in southwestern Connecticut. Reduce burps by not talking with your mouth full, eating slowly and skipping carbonated drinks. **WHEN TO WORRY** Burps plus burning chest pain or a sore throat might be symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux disease, which can be treated with Rx drugs.

HICCUPS occur when your diaphragm spasms, causing an inhale that's abruptly stopped by the glottis (part of the larynx). The diaphragm is partially controlled by the vagus and phrenic nerves, which can be stimulated by excitement, nervousness, certain meds or stomach distention after a big meal. You might be able to halt them by holding your breath, which ups carbon dioxide levels in the lungs and may relax the diaphragm. **WHEN TO WORRY** If hiccups last longer than 48 hours, seek medical care to rule out nerve irritation or a central nervous system problem.



If you burp a lot, skip straws so you'll gulp down less air.

YOUR GUT

RUMBLING or gurgling that seems to come from your belly is actually the sound of air and fluid as they're moved by muscles through the digestive tract. If you experience the noise on an empty stomach, it could mean your gut is sweeping out leftover debris—or it's a cue that it's mealtime. "When you're hungry, your brain sends a signal to your intestines that can stimulate the same activity," Dr. Gruss says. **WHEN TO WORRY** Experiencing high-pitched noises (with pain, cramping or nausea) but no BMs is a marker of partial bowel obstruction, which may require surgery.

FARTING is often a melodious indicator that your gut flora are digesting high-fiber foods, like cruciferous veggies and beans. The by-products—including methane, nitrogen and hydrogen gases—are expelled through your rectum. Give your digestive system time to adjust to a fiber-rich diet. It's worth the wait: Fiber has been linked to lower cholesterol, better bowel health and a slimmer waistline. **WHEN TO WORRY** Flatulence (with cramping and diarrhea) that occurs after you eat dairy could indicate lactose intolerance. Having these symptoms after drinking soda or fruit juice might point to a digestive disorder called fructose malabsorption. To check, try cutting out the offending foods for a week or two. Otherwise, flatulence is rarely something to worry about.

Whoopie! There may be a simple solution for excessive farts: Try avoiding dairy.

YOUR VAGINA

QUEEFING (aka vaginal wind) is the sound of an air pocket being pushed out of your vagina, explains Leah Millheiser, MD, director of the Female Sexual Medicine Program at Stanford Health Care. Air can get trapped up there when the vaginal opening closes during physical activity or sex, for example. Good old Kegel exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor may help keep air from getting into the vagina in the first place, Dr. Millheiser says. **WHEN TO WORRY** If you notice a foul odor or find stool in your vagina, call your gyno right away. Both are signs of a rectovaginal fistula, a tear that links the rectum and vagina, which typically requires surgery to repair.

YOUR JOINTS

POPPING and cracking are usually no biggie. Your joints are lubricated by fluid; when you squat or stand, the pressure in a healthy joint changes and the fluid may form bubbles that pop. **WHEN TO WORRY** "If you have popping associated with pain, locking or instability, see your doctor," urges Mark R. Hutchinson, MD, professor of orthopedics and sports medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "It could be a tendon or ligament rupture, a fracture or a cartilage injury." Hear creaking with a grinding sensation? That might signal osteoarthritis, as cartilage starts to deteriorate. Anti-inflammatory meds and physical therapy can bring relief. ■

SOUNDS THAT ALARM

These three indicate a problem in your airway and warrant a call to your doctor, stat.

1

WHEEZING

Dial 911 if you can't catch your breath. Allergies, asthma or even congestive heart failure can cause the bronchi in your lungs to become inflamed and swollen. Heart failure may require hospitalization, while allergies and asthma can typically be treated with medication.

2

SNORTING OR GASPING AT NIGHT

Both are associated with sleep apnea, a condition in which the airway frequently collapses. Two other telltale signs, according to Renu Lalwani, MD, an internist at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons: You snore and regularly feel tired during the day. (See page 102 for information on treatment.)

3

WHOOPIING

People who have pertussis (or whooping cough) make this strange sound when they try to inhale through an inflamed airway following coughing spasms. Episodes are usually worse at night. The infection is highly contagious and is considered especially risky for children. All kids—and adults—should get the DTaP vaccine.

BODY NOISE ALL-STARS

Seven of the loudest natural emissions of all time, according to Guinness World Records. (For reference, a vacuum is 70 decibels.)

