

The 20-Minute YAWN break

Why do we yawn? It's a question that has been asked countless times, and the answer is usually, "We don't know." Still, this hasn't stopped us from speculating, and now scientists are suggesting that yawning might actually be good for us, and could even help us to delay tiredness and increase concentration. **By Clare Diston**



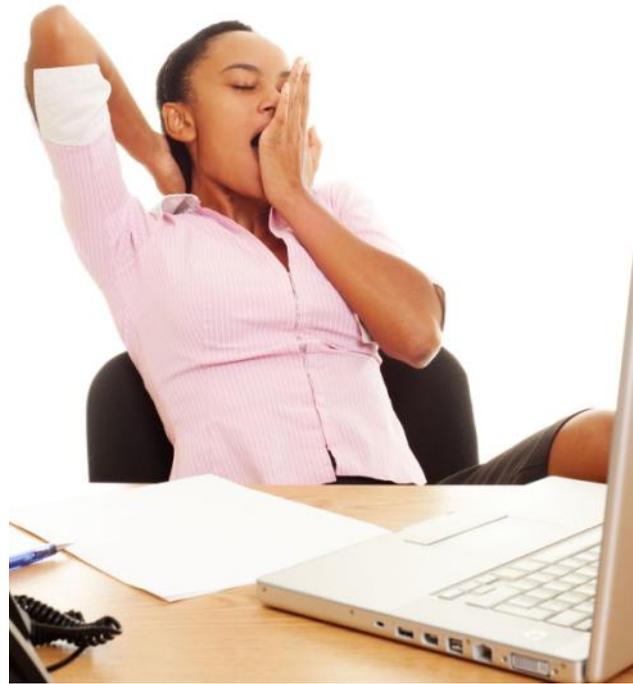
Because I'm tired, because it's warm, because I wish that boring person would just stop droning on and on... All of these are reasons you might give for letting out a yawn, but after decades of research, is science any closer to understanding what the yawn is *really* about?

Almost everybody yawns, and several researchers have discovered that even foetuses yawn in the womb, indicating that this behaviour isn't something we learn to do by observing others, but something primitive that is hard-wired into our brains. This would explain why yawning is so universal, but there's no doubt that it still remains something of a mystery.

Over the years scientists have studied the physiological effects of yawning, in order to try and understand why we do it. Usually a yawn involves opening the mouth wide and breathing in deeply to fill the lungs; it was for this reason that psychologist Gordon Gallup suggested that yawning acts as a cooling mechanism for our brains, because yawning circulates a large amount of cooler outside air within the body.

Another theory revolves around the contagious nature of yawning. If you see someone else yawn then you're very likely to start doing it too, and even reading about yawning (like you're doing right now) could set you off, no matter how hard you try to stop it. Of course, this isn't necessarily a good thing because yawning is often associated with boredom and tiredness, and could be taken as a rude gesture by whomever you happen to be near when you yawn. However, some researchers have suggested that, since yawning is so contagious, it could exist in order to cement group bonds and make individuals more empathetic.

In fact, yawning may even have positive effects on your health. Some studies have suggested that yawning can block the reuptake of serotonin in the brain, effectively creating a similarly uplifting effect as anti-depressants. Other studies have shown that yawning can increase your heart rate by up to 30%. This might seem to go against the idea that we yawn when we're tired, but it also indicates that, rather than being a symptom of tiredness, yawning could instead be a way of combating fatigue.



Have you ever noticed that you yawn when you most need to concentrate? Some scientists have suggested that this could be your brain's way of making you more alert. By getting the blood pumping and stimulating the precuneus – a part of your brain responsible for consciousness and attention – yawning may perk you up so you can focus on the task at hand.

Of course, if yawning really is a way for your brain to rev its engines, then there must be ways to harness the power of yawning and make it work for you. The Pomodoro Technique promotes taking a 5-minute break for every 20-25 minutes of work you do, in order to stretch your legs and rest your eyes without breaking your working rhythm. Incorporating yawns into your regular breaks could be a great way to refocus your mind and help you crack on with the next task.

So the next time you have a big job to do, or you're just feeling sluggish or tired, take a few minutes to deliberately yawn and see whether it helps you feel refreshed.

Autumn Yoga Pose

