mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why do we yawn?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Doug! That was real. If I'm yawning in the middle of the day, it's only because I'm *so* tired. So these trees behind me are beneath my bedroom window, and last night, there was a mockingbird in there singing all night long. So I didn't get a lot of sleep, and I'm yawning more than usual today. I'm going to be smart tonight, and I'm going to wear earplugs. Yawning, though, it's such a strange thing we do, isn't it?

This week's question comes from someone named Subah. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hey, Subah!
- I have a question for you. Why do we yawn?
- That is such a great question.

Maybe one of the strangest things about yawning is this—seeing someone else yawn, even hearing someone else yawn, makes us yawn. For this reason, some people like to joke that yawning is contagious. It's as if it spreads from one person to another. Talking about yawning, or sometimes even just thinking about yawning, can make you yawn. Maybe you're yawning right now as I'm talking about this. That is so weird, right?

But why do we do it? What good is yawning? Does yawning help us in some way? What do you think? Now would be a good time to pause the video and discuss.

VIDEO 2

Well, even more mysterious about yawning is this—we don't really know why we yawn. One idea that you might hear sometimes is that people yawn when they need to get more air or oxygen. But scientists have checked this and found out that can't be true. No matter how much oxygen is in the air around us, people don't yawn any more or any less often.

There are other ideas that scientists are checking out, but so far, at least, no one has been able to prove any of these ideas to be true—not yet. But what we can do is we can at least observe as much as we can about yawning, and we found some pretty interesting things.

As far as we know, everyone yawns. There isn't a single case of a person who never yawns. It seems that most people yawn about 15 or 16 times a day. And, not too surprising, people yawn more right before they go to bed.

We all know yawning is something you do when you're tired, but we also know that yawning is something you do when you're bored, right? That's why yawning when someone is talking to you is considered so rude. But, that might not be totally fair. Remember, yawning is contagious. It could be that you're yawning because you saw someone else yawn—or you might just be tired, not bored.

Either way, yawning is something we do our whole lives. Scientists have discovered, using special tools like a 3D ultrasound, that babies even yawn while they're still growing inside their mother. We all start yawning before we're even born.

And it's not just human beings who yawn, either. Pigs yawn. Bunnies yawn. Horses yawn. Crocodiles yawn. Whoa! Snakes yawn. Some animals even yawn contagiously, just like we do. Sometimes, this even works between people and animals—like if you look at a dog and yawn, it will often yawn back. Try it for yourself and see what happens.

So in summary, we don't know why we yawn. But given that yawning is something we do every day of our lives—and that even lots of animals do—could it be that yawning is something important for our bodies to do? Maybe you or someone watching this video will be the person to one day figure that out.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Subah, for asking it!