

READING CHALLENGE

Why Do We Yawn?

Everybody yawns. Even babies. Even fish. But why?

Level	A1 (Beginner)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	Science & Discovery
Duration	~12 minutes
Skill	Reading

You are sitting in class. The teacher is talking. You are a little **tired**. Then it happens. Your mouth opens wide. Your eyes close. You breathe in deeply. You **yawn**. You cannot stop it. It just happens. But why? Why do we **yawn**? And here is an even bigger question: did you just **yawn** while reading this? Many people do!

What Is a Yawn?

Let us start with the basics. A **yawn** is very simple. You open your mouth wide. You breathe in a lot of air. Your **jaw** drops down. Your lungs fill with air. The muscles in your face and neck **stretch**. Then you breathe out. The whole thing takes about six seconds.

A **yawn** is a **reflex**. That means your body does it automatically. You do not decide to **yawn**. Your **brain** sends a **signal**, and your body yawns. You can try to stop a **yawn**, but it is very hard. Try it next time. You will see!

When Do We Yawn?

Think about when you **yawn**. You **yawn** when you are **tired**. You **yawn** before you go to bed. You **yawn** when you wake up in the morning. You **yawn** when you are **bored**. You **yawn** in class when the lesson is not interesting. You **yawn** when you are sitting and doing nothing.

But here is something strange. You also **yawn** at other times. Athletes **yawn** before a big race. Students **yawn** before an exam. Soldiers **yawn** before a battle. These people are not **tired**. They are not **bored**. They are nervous and excited. So why do they **yawn**?

The Old Theory: Oxygen

For a long time, people believed this: we **yawn** because we need more **oxygen**. The idea was simple. When you are **tired** or **bored**, you breathe slowly. Your body does not get enough **oxygen**. So you **yawn** to take a big breath of air. More air means more **oxygen**. More **oxygen** means you feel more **awake**.

This sounds good. But scientists tested it. They gave people extra **oxygen**. Did the people stop yawning? No! They yawned the same amount. Then scientists put people in a room with less **oxygen**. Did they **yawn** more? No! They yawned the same amount. So the **oxygen** theory was wrong.

The New Theory: Brain Cooling

Today, many scientists believe a different idea. They think we **yawn** to cool down our **brain**. Yes, really! Your **brain** works best at a certain **temperature**. When your **brain** gets too warm, it does not work as well. You feel **tired**. You cannot think clearly.

When you **yawn**, you breathe in cool air. This cool air goes through your nose and mouth. It cools the blood near your **brain**. Your **brain temperature** drops a little. And you feel more **awake**. It is like a fan for your **brain**!

Scientists found proof for this idea. They did a test. They put a warm cloth on people's foreheads. These people yawned more. Then they put a cold cloth on people's foreheads. These people yawned less. When the **brain** is already cool, you do not need to **yawn**. This makes the **brain** cooling theory very strong.

Why Is Yawning Contagious?

This is the most interesting part. Yawning is **contagious**. You see someone **yawn**, and you **yawn** too. You hear someone **yawn**, and you **yawn** too. You read the word "**yawn**," and you might **yawn** too. (Are you yawning right now?)

About 50% of people **yawn** when they see another person **yawn**. It happens very quickly. You see a **yawn**, and within five minutes, you **yawn** too. But why?

Scientists think it is about empathy. Empathy is when you understand how another person feels. When you see someone **yawn**, your **brain** thinks: "That person is **tired**." And your **brain** copies the feeling. You feel **tired** too. So you **yawn**.

There is proof for this. Scientists found that people with more empathy catch yawns more easily. Also, you are more likely to catch a **yawn** from someone you know — a friend or family member — than from a **calm** stranger. Your **brain** cares more about people you love. So it copies their yawns more.

Do Animals Yawn?

Yes! Many animals **yawn**. Dogs **yawn**. Cats **yawn**. Lions **yawn**. Monkeys **yawn**. Birds **yawn**. Even fish **yawn**! Scientists have filmed fish opening their mouths very wide — just like a human **yawn**.

Snakes **yawn** too. After eating a big meal, a snake opens its **jaw** very wide. This looks like a big, slow **yawn**. Some scientists think the snake is stretching its **jaw** muscles after eating.

Here is something amazing: dogs can catch yawns from humans! If you **yawn** near your dog, your dog might **yawn** too. Scientists tested this. It is true. Dogs are very good at reading human emotions. They catch our yawns because they feel empathy for us. That is how close dogs and humans are.

Babies and Yawning

Babies **yawn** a lot. But here is the interesting thing: babies start yawning before they are born! Scientists used special cameras to look at babies inside their mothers. They saw the

babies yawning at about 11 weeks. That is very early. The baby is only about 4 centimetres long at that point.

Why do babies **yawn** before they are born? Scientists think it helps the baby's **brain** grow. Yawning stretches the **jaw** and face muscles. It might also help the baby's lungs get ready to breathe air.

But here is another interesting fact: **contagious** yawning does not start until a child is about four or five years old. Young children see other people **yawn**, but they do not catch the **yawn**. Scientists think this is because empathy develops slowly. Very young children do not have strong empathy yet. As they grow older and learn to understand other people's feelings, they start catching yawns.

Fun Yawn Facts

A **yawn** lasts about six seconds. During those six seconds, your heart beats faster. That is why you sometimes feel more **awake** after a **yawn**.

Most people **yawn** about 20 times a day. But some people **yawn** much more.

You **yawn** more in winter than in summer. Why? Because the air is cooler in winter. Cool air is better for cooling your **brain**. In summer, the air is hot, so yawning does not cool your **brain** as well.

It is very hard to **yawn** with your mouth closed. Try it! Your body wants to open your mouth wide.

Some people say that covering your mouth when you **yawn** is polite. This tradition is very old. In the past, people believed that your soul could escape through your mouth when you yawned. Covering your mouth kept your soul inside!

What Can We Learn?

Yawning is a small, simple thing. But it teaches us something big. Our bodies are amazing. They do things automatically to keep us healthy. Yawning cools our **brain**. Yawning stretches our muscles. Yawning keeps us **awake** when we need to be **awake**.

And **contagious** yawning teaches us something about being human. We are connected to each other. When someone near us is **tired**, we feel it too. Our brains care about other people. Even a simple **yawn** shows that we are social animals who feel what others feel. So the next time you **yawn**, do not be embarrassed. Your **brain** is just doing its job. And if the person next to you yawns too — well, that just means you are connected.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
yawn	to open your mouth very wide and breathe in deeply, usually when you are tired
brain	the part inside your head that controls your body and your thinking
tired	feeling that you need to sleep or rest
bored	not interested in what is happening, wanting something more fun
oxygen	a gas in the air that we need to breathe to stay alive
contagious	spreading easily from one person to another
jaw	the bone in your face that moves when you open and close your mouth
muscle	a part inside your body that helps you move
temperature	how hot or cold something is
stretch	to make your body or a body part long and straight
reflex	something your body does automatically, without you thinking about it
lung	one of the two parts inside your chest that you use to breathe
awake	not sleeping, with your eyes open
calm	quiet, relaxed, not excited or worried
signal	a message that tells you something or tells your body to do something

Comprehension Quiz

1. How long does a normal yawn last?

- A) About one second
- B) About six seconds
- C) About thirty seconds
- D) About one minute

2. What is the most popular theory about why we yawn?

- A) Yawning cleans our teeth
- B) Yawning helps cool down our brain
- C) Yawning makes us taller
- D) Yawning helps us hear better

3. Why is yawning contagious?

- A) Because yawns are very loud
- B) Because of a virus that travels through the air
- C) Scientists think it is connected to empathy
- D) Because we copy everything other people do

4. When do babies start yawning?

- A) When they are one year old
- B) When they are one month old
- C) Before they are born, inside the mother
- D) Only when they learn to talk

5. Which of these animals does NOT yawn?

- A) Dogs
- B) Fish
- C) Snakes
- D) The article says all of these animals yawn

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	1. How long does a normal yawn last?
2	B	2. What is the most popular theory about why we yawn?
3	C	3. Why is yawning contagious?
4	C	4. When do babies start yawning?
5	D	5. Which of these animals does NOT yawn?