



ACT Palliative Care
Society Inc.



Calvary
Health Care
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Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

Hiccups are a peculiar problem. Most people have had passing experience of hiccups during their life, particularly in childhood. However, the cause(s) and mechanism of hiccups in the throat and chest are still poorly understood. It is not surprising to find that there are thousands of home remedies that have been suggested and tried over the ages to fix the problem of hiccups. Sometimes one remedy works well and at other times nothing seems to work and the hiccups go away of their own accord.

For people who are unwell and living with a life limiting illness hiccups can be a minor nuisance. In rare cases however, they can become a very distressing symptom. This is partly because they can be persistent (lasting for many hours or days and sometimes for weeks) and/or because they generally do not go away with the usually effective home remedies that have proven to be effective in normal circumstances. They can cause a great deal of ache in the chest, get in the way of conversation and eating, rob people of a good nights sleep, and can lead to frustration, exhaustion and/or despair.

In the case of people living with a life limiting illness, the causes of hiccups can be complex and varied. The main causes are thought to be due to:

- Swelling or squashing of the stomach or the food pipe (the oesophagus).
- Irritation of either the nerve that goes to the diaphragm or the nerve that is responsible for swallowing. (This can be caused by tumours, treatments for tumours or by infections, stretching of organs or by chemical imbalances.)
- Tumours (or treatments for tumours, or a range of other complications) that affect the part of the brain that is responsible for hiccups.
- Disease-related chemical imbalances.
- Any one or more of a range of medications that are used to treat other symptoms.

If hiccups become a problem for the person you are caring for, and they do not go away and stay away with the usual remedies, it may be necessary to involve the care team in fixing the problem.

The nurse in your team will start by running through the home remedies that have already been tried, and make an assessment of the factors that are contributing. It may be that the doctor in your care team needs to become involved to help sort through possible causes and strategies to correct any reversible causes. Sometimes there is a build up of gas in the stomach that can be overcome with degassing tablets or peppermint water. Sometimes changing some medications may help or trying to correct any apparent chemical imbalances or infections. Sometimes it may be necessary to trial medications to combat hiccups more directly and there are a number of options that a doctor may try. The main drug is an anti-spasm drug called Baclofen. In instances where hiccups are causing distress, a sedative injection can be used to break the cycle.

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This information should be read in conjunction with the advice provided by your palliative care team.

