

Shooting the Breeze About Sneezing

By Patti A. Wood

www.pattiwood.net

Official spokesperson for Benadryl® and creator of the “Benadryl® Sneeze Analysis, also known as “The Achoo IQ Quiz”

What is a sneeze?

It is a sudden, violent, spasmodic, audible expiration of breath through the nose and mouth.

What is going on in the body during a sneeze?

Something irritates the lining in our nostrils. That irritation excites your trigeminal nerve. (An excited nerve tends to get frisky.) The impulse travels to a set of neurons in the brain stem called the “sneezing center.” It’s a lot like an astronaut saying, “Houston, we have a problem.” The center tells your body to rock and roll. The sneeze itself involves the chest, abdomen, diaphragm, vocal chords, throat and eyelids. It sends impulses along the facial nerve back to the nasal passages and causes your nasal passages to secrete fluid and become congested. Then it sends impulses to your respiratory muscles via the spinal column that causes the deep intake, followed by the forceful expiration and the “achoo.” That’s how you release the irritant that's causing the itch.

What makes us sneeze?

Several things: Cold viruses make the nostrils extra-sensitive to irritants. Allergic reaction to pollen can cause the nose to release histamines, which are irritating chemicals that induce sneezing. Taking an antihistamine such as Benadryl® Allergy blocks that natural release of histamines.

Some other things that can make us sneeze include cold air, humidity, irritants such as pepper or other smells, exposure to bright sunlight(called the ACHOO syndrome), eating too much, cooling certain parts of the skin, sexual excitement, hair pulling, shivering and even eyebrow plucking (eyebrow plucking excites the branch of the nerve that supplies you nasal passages). Sneezing Facts: People say they sneeze more during allergy season than during cold and flu season. Up to 67 percent of people want to be prepared for their sneeze and 60 percent want to control it. So why not take Benadryl?

Can the light of the sun make you sneeze?

Bright sunlight causes one out of three people to sneeze. The light sneezers are called "photics" from the Greek meaning "of light." Light sensitivity is an inherited trait. Just one more thing we can blame on our parents.

Does global warming cause sneezing?

Yes. Scientists such as those at the USDA and others report, "... global warming produces higher temperatures and increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide, contributing to ragweed growing faster, flowering earlier, producing significantly larger plants and generating more pollen in urban areas than rural areas." (from BusinessWire)

When are people most bothered by other people's sneezes?

Not surprisingly, they are most bothered while they're eating.

Are there any benefits to sneezing?

If there is anything irritating your nose, the sneeze gets it out. (However, it would be simpler, and less embarrassing to stop the irritation with Benadryl.) Also, the Dalai Lama says that according to Buddhist teachings, people can attain low level near-death awareness and "clear light" by sneezing. (They also get this from falling asleep, yawning and orgasm.)

Why do we say "God bless you"?

The word for sneeze in Greek is "pneuma" which means "soul or spirit." A post-sneeze blessing stems from the ancient belief that sneezing is a near-death experience, and that a blessing will prevent your soul or sneeze from escaping your body and will deter the devil from entering in.

The Romans used five different systems of omens to foretell events. The fifth was called the Dira which covered events such as spilling salt on the table, wine on our clothes, stumbling or sneezing. God bless you was a common expression in Roman times. The sneeze was considered the same thing as the soul until the sixteenth century when we found out what a respiratory system was. It resembled what the Chinese call Chi and Hawaiians call the HA as in HAwaii or AloHA and depending on the biblical translation of Genesis, God's breath was upon the waters or his spirit was upon the waters (they translate the same). A loose biblical interpretation could be, "God sneezed the earth into creation." I wonder who said "God bless you" afterwards?

Activists in Italy recently requested that there be a law requiring citizens to say, "Bless you" after someone sneezes. The activists believe that this "prevents demons from flying into the mouth of the person who sneezes, making them sick."

In the Quran there are several passages that encourage blessing the sneezer. One quote, "Allah's Apostle ordered us to do seven things...He ordered us to follow the funeral procession, to visit the sick, to accept invitation, to help the oppressed, to fulfill the oaths, to return the greeting and to reply to the sneezer saying 'May Allah be merciful on you.'" Provided the sneezer says, upon his or her sneeze "All the praises are for Allah."

If you're an atheist you could say, "May humanity bring benefits to you."

So how do people keep from sneezing, and according to folk lore, risk losing their souls?

The number one answer from independent research is putting the finger under the nose and pushing up. My research showed that 48 percent say they either put their finger under their nose or pinch their nose. Another 20 percent use allergy medication, and 32 percent use an assortment of accessories from the practical and polite handkerchiefs to their hands (gross), shirtsleeves and collars (also gross) to repeating a mantra such as saying "watermelon" three times and circling the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth. Other do the opposite of practical—they look at sunlight, which actually makes you sneeze.

Should you try to hold back a sneeze?

Nope. That can cause pressure and lightheadedness. There are reported cases of people suffering a stroke from the pressure. Doctors state that stifling the sneeze makes you squeeze the blood vessels reducing your circulation.

How fast is a sneeze?

Most of the research says that sneezing expels air from your nose at approximately 100 mph. (That's 320 km/h with the average force of a sneeze at 167 km/h.) It's so powerful because it is a reflex response that involves the mucus muscles of the face, throat, and chest. One sneeze can propel 100,000 bacteria into the air. And the spray itself can travel as far as any wind current can take it, which may be hundreds of miles.

What do people use when they sneeze?

When asked if they use anything when they sneeze 60 percent of people said they use a tissue or a hand (their own, we hope). Kind of makes you wonder what the other 40 percent are doing. Where is all that sneeze spray going? Maybe I should start passing out Benadryl.

Are there any other superstitions about sneezing?

Some believe that a sneeze means that company is coming (perhaps a good reason to take Benadryl) or that you will have good or bad luck based on the number of sneezes or the time of the day or day of the week.

Number of sneezes: once a wish, twice a kiss, three times something better.

Days of the week:

Sneeze on a Tuesday – kiss a stranger

Sneeze on a Wednesday – sneeze for a letter

Sneeze on a Thursday – something better
Sneeze on a Friday – sneeze for sorrow
Sneeze on a Saturday – see your sweetheart tomorrow
Sneeze on a Sunday – you safety seek:
The devil will have you the whole of the week.

What does folklore say it means when your cat sneezes?

That it is going to green.

What animal sneezes the most?

Iguanas sneeze more often and more productively than any other animal. Sneezing is how they rid their bodies of certain salts that are the normal byproduct of their digestive process.

How is sneezing related to the invention of movies?

In 1888 Thomas Edison was looking at a sequence of pictures of someone sneezing, and he realized that if you viewed them in a sequence very quickly that you might be able to make into a movie. (See www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr004p.html for more information.)

What is the world sneezing record?

The Guinness world record for having the longest sneezing fit on record is 977 days with an estimated 1 million times the first year.

What does your sneeze style say about your personality?

I have done survey research on 547 people. As well as three months of observational research on the activity. As part of that research I correlated the DiSC (yes little I) personality standard (a well researched personality test) with people's sneezing behaviors and actions. You may not at "first sneeze" think that your sneeze says something about the type of person you are. You may say, "Hey, it is just a spontaneous thing." In fact 49 percent of those asked said their sneeze is spontaneous.

However, although the sneeze is a reflective action, it is like much seemingly simple body language from yawning and coughing to chewing. You will have idiosyncratic cues that accompany the behavior that say things about you. Your nose knows you and most of us have a sneeze style that we stick with throughout our lives that matches our personality.

Of course, our desire to be polite in public can make us sneeze differently. About half (45 percent) of those surveyed say they have a public sneeze that differs from their private sneeze. The research shows the private sneeze as being reflective of their true

personality. What is our biggest concern that causes us to change our sneeze like Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde? Well, when asked what best describes what is going through your mind when you sneeze 47 percent, regardless of personality, responded with “I hope I don't bother anyone.” So we may stifle our true personality sneeze in our concern for others.

Of the people who say they change their nose blowing or sneezing style in a public place other research says 80 percent say they do this by blowing or sneezing more quietly or discretely.

Sneeze style- The majority of people surveyed had a sneeze that matched their personality.

The NICE Sneezer.---You are warm and friendly and like a relaxed pace. The most important thing in your life is your relationships with others. You will work to avoid conflict and get along, even not saying anything and making personal sacrifices to do so. You are loyal, calm, and dependable. People say you are a good listener, though sometimes you feel interrupted. You are helpful, supportive and nurturing of others. You tend to have a single achoo, and you are more likely to turn away when you sneeze than other types. (S)

The BE RIGHT Sneezer --You are careful, and accurate. A deep thinker you always consider things before you speak. You are detailed and precise and catch mistakes that others miss. You have great insights and opinions, but you don't always get a chance to express them. You like to read books that make you think. You like to work by yourself and relax at home, because you enjoy solitude. You take your time, play by the rules and wish others would do the same. You are more likely to cover your mouth when you sneeze than other types. (R)

The GET IT DONE Sneezer --You are fast, decisive and to the point. You wish others could be the same. You're efficient and uncomplicated. You do not have to rely on others. You are a leader. You are decisive, forceful and commanding and work to get things quickly accomplished. You seek physical exertion. You do not like to be used unfairly by others. You will hold in your sneeze if you can and are more likely to have a big loud sneeze than other types. (D)

The ENTHUSIASTIC Sneezer--You are a charismatic leader and influencer. You are imaginative and have great "out of box" ideas. You are intuitive and can inspire and motivate others. You value your relationships and hold them dear. You welcome new people and new opportunities. You are optimistic, spontaneous.. You are open and people know what you are feeling. You are articulate and enjoy a good conversation whether it is on the phone, over dinner or out socializing. You are more likely to have sneezes that people notice - big or multiple. (E)

Findings:

- 76 percent of big sneezers chose D or E personality
- The majority of multiple sneezers (46 percent) are E personalities
- 47 percent of "cover it up" sneezers are R personalities
- 70 percent of "hold it in" sneezers are D or S personalities

Gender differences:

- 32 %of women hold in their sneeze. (Women have a lot of practice at withholding.)

- 26 % of women are multiple sneezers. (I could say something here, but I won't.)
- Surprise, Surprise! The majority of men (46 percent) say they are “big” sneezers. (You know men are always exaggerating.) And 27 percent say they are multiple sneezers (Perhaps wishful thinking again.)

During the research people added these additional styles. Do you have any others?

Big Bad Wolf Sneeze - the person huffs and puffs before sneezing as if they could blow the whole house down.

The Tease - This is the person who captures our attention and may rivet an entire room to freeze in place as they listen to the sneezer go “aahhh ahhhh” with only a tiny little anticlimactic “achoo” to end it.

Spray Gun - This sneezer makes you wish you were carrying an umbrella and wearing a raincoat.

Freeze tag - The sneezer’s whole face and body freeze perhaps for several seconds as the sneeze builds up internally and then suddenly explodes out, animating the entire person.

Hand as Handkerchief - This sneezer lets it go right into their hand. This is really annoying if they then offer their hand in a handshake. If you want to avoid the germ hand try holding a drink or appetizer or paperwork in your right hand.

The How High Can You Count? Sneeze - The sneezer that keeps sneezing one right after the other till you begin to look for the count from sesame street to start counting with you.

The Cartoon Sneeze – This sounds like a little kid sneezing, also known as the dainty sneeze .

The Coughing Sneeze – This is a series of cough-like sounding sneezes close together without a breath.

The Shout It Out Sneeze - This manly man sneeze is so loud it can be heard in the next state.

Other words people used to describe their sneezes: *enthusiastic, complete, tickle, obnoxious, powerful, squeaky and roller coaster.*

So, there you have it. My takes on sneezing styles for you and for people you watch in real life.

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