

What Those Body Noises Are Trying to Tell You

From popping knees to gurgling tummies, sounds could mean troubling symptoms

by Stacey Colino, AARP, December 8, 2020



If it seems as though your body has become noisier than it used to be, it may not be your imagination. But when cartoonish gurgles, growls, snorts, whistles or pops regularly emanate from various parts of your body — sometimes at inopportune moments — it's time to pause and listen to what those sounds may be trying to tell you.

Here's a closer look at why various noises happen, and when they're cause for concern.

Belly Rumblings

Why It Happens: Stomach gurgling and flatulence can be unwelcome rewards for having healthfully upped your intake of fruits, vegetables and other high-fiber foods that produce gas in your intestines. These symptoms can also be a sign of lactose intolerance, even if you've never had it before. "We are all much more likely to become lactose intolerant after age 40 because as we get older, there's a marked decrease in the amount of lactase [the enzyme needed to digest the lactose in milk and other dairy products] that's produced in our intestines," says Cynthia Yoshida, M.D., a professor of gastroenterology at the University of Virginia Digestive Health Center.

Cause for Concern: Stomach gurgling that's accompanied by abdominal pain and vomiting could be due to a gastrointestinal blockage, so be sure to consult your doctor if you have this blend of symptoms. For the vast majority of people, stomach gurgling on its own isn't anything to worry about, Yoshida says. If intestinal rumblings are accompanied by gas pain, taking an over-the-counter medicine that contains simethicone — such as Gas-X, Mylanta or Maalox Plus — may help.

Cracking Joints

Why It Happens: If your joints are talking back to you, “it's not something to fear in and of itself,” says Joel Press, M.D., physiatrist-in-chief at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. The sound could stem from air or gas bubbles being released in the synovial fluid around the joint, which is often the case when your wrists, knees or feet crack. Or, it could be from a muscle or tendon snapping against the side of your anklebone or hip bone when you stretch your leg after sitting for a long time. By contrast, a grinding sound that occurs in your knees could be due to some degeneration. “As we get older, we all get wear and tear in our joints — it's like gray hair and wrinkles,” Press explains. “As cartilage wears down, you have less shock absorption so when two areas rub against each other, you may hear some noise.”

Cause for Concern: The key question is: Does the joint hurt when it makes noise? If it does, or if the joint is swollen, red or bruised, has limited mobility, or gets stuck or locked in place, those are signs of a problem. Joint noise accompanied by any of these symptoms may signal arthritis, an injury or a movement problem in the joint, Press says. If such symptoms are present, see your primary care physician, a musculoskeletal specialist, a physiatrist or an orthopedic surgeon.

Snoring

Why It Happens: When you sleep, air that flows by the floppy tissues and relaxed muscles at the back of your throat creates a vibrating effect that can produce snorting or rattling sounds. The aging process and alcohol use can amplify this effect, as they cause tissues to become even more lax, explains Clete Kushida, M.D., division chief and medical director of the Stanford University Sleep Medicine Center. Plus, since people often gain weight as they get older, they're more likely to become noisy sleepers. “This may be because if you end up with extra fat tissue around the upper airway in the neck, that can make the airway smaller and more likely to collapse while you sleep,” Kushida explains. Allergies or changes in nasal function, perhaps due to developing a deviated septum (the septum separates the nasal passages), also can cause you to breathe through your mouth more while you sleep, which can trigger snoring.

Cause for Concern: Occasional snoring isn't anything to worry about. But regular snoring has been linked with elevated blood pressure, and it's a symptom of obstructive sleep apnea — a potentially serious disorder in which breathing repeatedly stops then restarts during sleep — Kushida explains. Also, if you're always exhausted despite spending enough time in bed, or if your partner notices that you sometimes stop breathing, gag or make choking sounds when you

snore, see a sleep specialist or an otolaryngologist. If left untreated, sleep apnea can increase your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Jaw Clicking

Why It Happens: It can be due to inflammation of the muscles around the jaw joint, overextension of the jaw (if you open your mouth too wide), arthritis or even a past injury, explains Gigi Meinecke, a dentist in Potomac, Maryland, and a spokesperson for the Academy of General Dentistry. “Collectively, these problems fall under the heading of TMD, or temporomandibular joint dysfunction.” You can hardly blame the joint, though, given that it gets a workout every time you talk, yawn or chew, which leads to wear and tear over time. Stress can make the problem worse, especially if you carry tension in this area during the day or grind your teeth at night, Meinecke says. “Some medications can cause you to grind your teeth. If your dentist determines your prescription medication is the cause, he or she may recommend Botox to alleviate this problem.”

Cause for Concern: If the clicking or popping is accompanied by pain, tenderness or locking of the jaw, schedule an appointment with your dentist. She or he might give you a special bite plate or mouth guard to wear at night or recommend anti-inflammatory pain medication (such as ibuprofen). If it turns out that your jaw is considerably out of whack, your dentist may recommend pain-relieving injections into the joint or surgery to restore proper alignment if your bite is asymmetrical.