
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Laughing could kill you



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English, where we bring you an entertaining topic and six related items of vocabulary. I'm Neil... and those guffaws you can hear are coming from Tim. So what's so funny, Tim?

Tim

Can you pass me a glass of water?

Neil

Yes, OK, here you go.

Tim

It was just something our producer said before I came into the studio. A **guffaw** by the way is a loud laugh that you can't control...

Neil

So while Tim **laughs his head off** – and that means to laugh very loudly for a long time – I'll introduce the show. Today, Tim, we're talking about laughter and how it could kill you...

Tim

Oh come on, Neil! That's not funny! Laughing is good for you – everyone knows that!

Neil

Well, not when you laugh like that, Tim! You're bright red in the face, you've got tears streaming down your face. And you nearly choked on a glass of water! **Choke** means to stop breathing because something is blocking your throat by the way. Now, without laughing or choking, can you please tell me how many times a day the average adult laughs? Is it...

- a) 17,
- b) 70 or
- c) 700?

Tim

Hmm. Surely it depends on what type of person you are?

Neil

Maybe it does. That's why I'm asking about the average number of times Tim, so just make an intelligent guess.

Tim

OK, well I laugh a lot so I'm going to say 70 times a day. 700 times seems like you'd be laughing all the time... But you've worried, me Neil – I know we sometimes say, I nearly died laughing – but nobody does actually die laughing, do they?

Neil

Well, I think the risk of dying of laughter is probably low – but in theory, what happens when we laugh is potentially dangerous! Let's listen to cognitive neuroscientist Sophie Scott talking about what happens when we laugh.

INSERT

Sophie Scott, cognitive neuroscientist

Laughter – in a competition for control over your ribcage in your brain between laughter and breathing and speaking – laughter will always win. And laughter just takes those same muscles and it squeezes them – eh eh eh eh – and the air goes – out out out out – and notably it does not want to let you breathe in. It's trying to kill you. It's quite dangerous.

Tim

So when you laugh a lot your **diaphragm** – that's the sheet of muscle below your lungs – contracts and squeezes the air out of your lungs.

Neil

This makes it hard to breathe – which is why you were gasping for breath earlier, Tim! And that's why laughter can kill you!

Tim

Gasping means having difficulty breathing. Well, I've caught my breath now – I didn't die – and I think it's fair to say, Neil, that laughter is good for you. When you laugh, your body releases happy hormones... And according to some research, people feel less pain as a result of having a good laugh.

Neil

So scientists are saying laughter is a sort of natural painkiller?

Tim

Apparently, yes. They've done research where they make people laugh, and then test their

pain levels afterwards. And they found that if people only chuckle a bit it doesn't act as a painkiller, but if you laugh a lot, it does.

Neil

So a chuckle sounds like this [chuckles]. **Chuckling** means to laugh quietly. So you need belly laughter then – great big guffaws?

Tim

That's right. A guffaw is pretty much the opposite of a chuckle. I was guffawing earlier in the show. Would you like to demonstrate your own guffaw, Neil?

Neil

[hearty guffaw]

Tim

Fantastic – can I try pinching you now, and test whether you feel any pain?

Neil

No, you can't, Tim. It's time for the answer to today's quiz question. I asked you: How many times a day does the average adult laugh? Is it... a) 17, b) 70 or c) 700?

Tim

I said 70...

Neil

Sorry. The right answer is actually 17 – less than you thought I'm afraid, Tim. But children laugh on average 300 times a day.

Tim

That's a big difference! You see, Neil, we all need to laugh more. You shouldn't be trying to tell us that laughing is dangerous.

Neil

Maybe you're right. So let's move on and go over the words we learned today. The first one is 'guffaw' – which is a loud laugh that you can't control...

Tim

“Neil surprised us with his deep guffaw.”

Neil

Next up – number two – to 'laugh your head off' – means to laugh very loudly for a long time.

Tim

“It's a really funny movie – you'll laugh your head off!”

Neil

OK – number three – 'choke' means to stop breathing because something is blocking your throat.

Tim

“I nearly choked to death on a cheese sandwich.”

Neil

Poor Tim – you should eat more slowly! 'Diaphragm' is our next word, and that's the sheet of muscle separating your lungs from your stomach. We use our diaphragms for breathing, talking, and laughing!

Tim

“Do opera singers have more powerful diaphragms than other people?”

Neil

I don't know the answer to that, Tim. So number five, which is 'gasping', which means having difficulty breathing. “He was gasping for breath as he swam to the surface of the swimming pool.”

Tim

But 'gasp' also means to be shocked or surprised by something. For example, “I gasped in astonishment when I heard Neil laugh.”

Neil

Our final word is 'chuckle' which means to laugh quietly.

Tim

“The audience chuckled through the show but they didn't seem very amused.”

Neil

Oh dear. Well I hope our audience has been amused today. If you're looking for more laughs, then please check out our Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube pages. You may find something to make you chuckle or guffaw there.

Tim and Neil

Bye!