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How To Sneeze

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A dust particle smacks your nose hair, sending neurons on a 100 millimeter dash to that cranial pot of gray jelly upstairs. Reacting faster than a teen to gossip, it phones your face, throat, and chest—which go for that molecule like a dugout of players at a pitcher who just beaned the batter—exploding air out of every facial orifice.

With that force comes a decision: how to sneeze. There are all sorts of ways of going through with it. Some people sneeze like wet whoopee cushions, their lips flapping unabashedly. Dainty sneezers scrunch their noses into accordion shapes to slow the expulsion—some even clench their teeth to stop saliva—then they act ashamed and excuse themselves profusely like they just stepped on your infant. My dad’s sneezes are fanfares announcing
his presence. Playing in my room as a child, I heard his symphonic gale thunder through the house, causing the window panes to shake and light fixtures to tremble in awe. (My old man also sneezes when he walks outside and the sun slaps his face, but when his cells made a leaf rub of chromosomes for me, they skipped over that frond.)

Of course, you can stifle a sneeze, but it’s generally thought of as a bad idea. Joey Nichols knew this in fifth grade. We were standing by the tetherball poles, fantasizing as usual about worlds filled with atomic weapons, when my nose twitched and my face puckered like an angry grandma’s. To avoid blasting my friend, I stopped the sneeze in the bridge of my nose. It felt like smashing a loaf of bread into a wall. Neglecting my thoughtfulness, Joey said, “Stopping a sneeze kills brain cells.”

I resented it, but Joey was right. What kind of self-respecting sneeze wouldn’t bust into my fat tub of grey matter and flip a table after an insult like that? Here it was, trying to get schmutz out of my filthy nostrils and I had the audacity to pull the brakes.
“How’s God going to bless you now, punk!?” it screamed, chucking a chair into my hippocampus.

Whether you go through with a sneeze or choose to rearrange your brain cells, you cannot decide to keep your eyes open. The very idea conjures mental images of eyes popping out like veiny tennis balls. From what I’ve gathered, it’s possible, but it requires eyelid clamps and results in severe pain.

Even though science has put men on the moon and made glow-in-the-dark monkeys, we still don’t know for certain why we close our eyes during a sneeze. The general hypothesis is that it developed as a way of keeping all the flying microbes from getting in our eyes. Another idea comes from the Middle Ages, when they thought sneezing was your soul escaping. If that’s true, it then makes sense to me why we close our eyes—nobody would want to look at that.

It’s commonly held that the “God bless you” adage originated in those times as a way of stuffing the sneezer’s soul back into their body. Saying “Bless you” is still the cultural obligation of any decent person within hearing range of a sneeze. When you yawn or burp you’re supposed to say “Excuse me,” but when you sneeze,
strangers in an elevator are supposed to call upon the Almighty on your behalf. When you cough or hiccup, nobody is obligated to say anything. You could be hacking away with whooping cough, yawning from narcolepsy, burping from giardia, and hiccupping from kidney failure, but the guy next to you with dust up his nose will get the blessing.

It's a good idea to cover your mouth when you sneeze, but you only really need to if there are other people around. Using your hands stops germs and saliva from speeding out at 100 miles an hour, but if you go around touching things that really ruins the whole point. The best solution, if you're not averse to accessories popular during the California Gold Rush, is to use a handkerchief. However, the local health department did teach my elementary school the "proper way" to cover a sneeze in a bus or other public area: turn your head and sneeze into your shoulder. I made fun of this to one of my friends and got sent to the principal's office. Sneezing into my shoulder is no laughing matter, though I'm pretty sure it would be for the people looking at me on the bus.

But, if no one's around, you can sneeze the way nature
intended. When you feel a buzz in your nose and a lift of your soft pallet, raise your head to the sky. Inhale deeply and roll gently onto your heels. Pushing the pressure out with your chest, lean forward until your head gives a curt nod and releases the sneeze. Savor the feeling of sending a cloud of microbial salivary vapor freely glistening into the sun. Your drops of spit may get evaporated and fall onto a droopy purple pansy as the first sign of Spring—or provide sanitation and drinking water to an ant village. The circle of life will be blessed because you have learned how to sneeze.