

Belching

Belch, from the Old English ‘*belcettan*,’ is what’s called an onomatopoeic word; that is, it reproduces a natural sound, like fizz. Belching, also known as burping, eructation, and ructus, is the return of air from either your esophagus or stomach through your mouth. Vibration of your upper esophageal sphincter produces the sound (you know the one) as air passes through it. In the way of belching basics, just know that air in = belches out.

Like everyone, you have two one-way valves, or sphincters, which open and close to let food and drink (and air) move down your throat, through your esophagus, and into your stomach. When you swallow, your upper sphincter opens to let food and drink (and air) enter your esophagus. As the food and drink (and air—see a pattern here?) reach the bottom of your esophagus, your lower sphincter opens and allows it to pass into your stomach.

While all belches sound similar, each has a distinct personality. *Bombshell* belches, for example, come from your stomach. They are spontaneous and involuntary. Bombshells happen when they happen. And they smell like whatever it was that you last ate. This can be a problem if you’re seated at the dinner table or meeting your girlfriend’s father for the first time.

Backfire belches are when you deliberately force air you swallowed while eating and drinking back out by contracting your abdominal muscles and relaxing your upper esophageal sphincter. Then there’s our personal favorite, the *Barrage*. It’s executed just like the backfire except that you intentionally swallow a gulp of air and immediately force it back up. This mother-of-all belches gives you the ability to belch at will. And with practice, you can control the belch’s duration, acoustic range, and volume.

According to people who are interested in these things, the loudest belch ever recorded (so far) was 107.1 decibels (dB). Paul Hunn from the United Kingdom achieved this record of epic proportions in London on September 24, 2008. And just so you'll know, Mr. Hunn produced about the same noise level with his belch, as does a power mower at a distance of 3 feet.

In most English-speaking countries, belching out loud is considered impolite. There are other places, though, where belching signals the host that you're finished with your meal and a good strong belch is considered an accolade for the cook. With these differences in mind, here are a few dos and don'ts for our little corner of the world.

Belching Dos and Don'ts

- Belch quietly and cover your mouth when there's sufficient warning of what's coming. Keep your lips closed if you can and quietly release the air through your nose or mouth.
- Say, "Excuse me!" no matter whether your burp is quiet or loud, a surprise or planned.
- Don't drink carbonated beverages, like sodas, from cans, bottles, or through a straw. (Unless you want to belch.)

CONSIDER THIS: There's no Guinness world record for the longest belch.

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