TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 228

Why Do We Get Goosebumps? | Curious English

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

84 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Imagine you are waiting for a bus on a very cold morning.

You look at your arm, and your skin is covered in tiny bumps.

Why does that happen?

Welcome to Curious English.

I'm Julia.

And I'm Martin.

Today's question is simple: why do we get goosebumps?

Before we answer, let's make a prediction.

Do we get goosebumps because of the cold, or because of emotion, like music?

I'll say emotion, because it happens to me when a song is really beautiful.

I'll say cold, because it was the first thing I thought of.

So, which one of us is right?

Well, here is the surprise: we both are.

First, let's see what a goosebump is.

Around the base of each hair on your skin, there is a very small muscle.

When that muscle pulls, the hair stands up.

The skin around the hair rises a little, and that makes the bump.

So the bump is just your skin, moving.

Exactly.

The name fits, because the skin can look a little like the skin of a goose.

Okay, but why do we have this reaction at all?

In animals with thick fur, the answer is clear.

When the hair stands up, it helps the animal stay warm.

But we don't have thick fur.

Right.

In people, goosebumps don't help much with warmth.

We still have the reaction, even though our body hair is too thin to keep us warm.

So it's like an old habit in our bodies.

You could say that, yes.

I notice it most when I leave a warm house in winter.

That is a very good example of the cold trigger.

Cold is a trigger that scientists have studied closely.

In 2020, a team of researchers published a study in a journal called Cell.

They worked with mice, not with people.

What did they find?

A hair follicle is the small structure in the skin where a hair grows.

In mice, the tiny muscle helps link nerves with stem cells there.

Stem cells are cells that can become other kinds of cells.

And what happened when the mice were cold?

The nerves became more active, and the muscle pulled.

When the cold continued, the stem cells began to make new hair.

In those mice, the same system lifted the hair quickly.

During longer exposure to cold, the researchers also observed new hair growth.

Wait, that's a big idea.

It is, but remember: this was research in mice.

We cannot say that people work in exactly the same way.

Good point.

And what about emotion?

Strong emotion can also give us goosebumps, and music is a famous example.

Today we are focusing on the cold, because that is what this study looked at.

Now let's learn three useful words.

First, goosebumps.

It is the plural noun for the little bumps on your skin.

We say, "I have goosebumps," or "That song gave me goosebumps."

You can also say, "My arms are covered in goosebumps."

And if a story surprises you, you can say, "That gave me goosebumps."

Second, shiver.

A shiver is a small shaking movement of your body, usually from cold, and sometimes from fear or excitement.

For example, "She shivered in the cold."

Third, get chills.

This is a feeling that goes through your body, often because of strong emotion.

For example, "I get chills when I hear that song."

Be careful, though: chills can also mean feeling cold when you are sick.

Today we mean the emotional kind.

Goosebumps are visible bumps, while a shiver is a shaking movement.

Chills can describe a cold feeling or an emotional reaction, and these experiences can overlap.

Time for a challenge.

Listen to each sentence, and choose goosebumps, shiver, or chills.

Number one: "The water was so cold that I started to ..."

The answer is shiver, because the body is shaking.

Number two: "Look at my arm, I have ..."

The answer is goosebumps, because you can see them.

Number three: "When the choir started singing, I got ..."

Chills is one natural answer for that feeling.

Goosebumps would also be natural if the music made the bumps appear on your skin.

Remember the key idea: tiny muscles lift your hairs, and that creates the bumps.

Let's go back to our prediction.

Cold gives us goosebumps, and so does emotion, so we were both right.

And now you know how this very old reaction works.

You can listen to this episode at seven different speeds on our website, yourenglishtoolbox.com.

Choose the speed that feels right for you.

The link is in the description.

Thanks for listening.

See you next time.