BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Why do we itch?

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil
Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgie
And I'm Georgie. Find the vocabulary, definitions and a free worksheet on our website, bbclearningenglish.com.

Neil
So, Georgie we're going to talk about something a little different today. We're talking about **itching**. Now an **itch** is that unpleasant feeling you get on your skin that you have to **scratch** with your fingers. What sort of things make you **itch**?

Georgie
Well, funny you should ask, because I'm actually wearing quite an **itchy** jumper at the moment and it's making me want to **scratch** my skin. What about you?

Neil
Well, recently I was bitten by a mosquito and, as you know, when you get bitten by a mosquito, it's really **itchy**. I had to **scratch** loads and loads.

Georgie
Oh, I hate it when that happens.

Neil
It was horrible. In this podcast, we're going to hear from some experts about why we **itch** and how **scratching** can be good for us.

Georgie
And as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary.

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Neil
OK. Well, we're going to start with a quiz question of course, Georgie. It's a bit of a different one today. Dr Henning Holle studies the psychology of **itching**, and he played some **scratching** sounds to the guests on the BBC World Service programme CrowdScience. Now the question is, what is being **scratched**? You have three choices:

a) an arm,
b) a beard, or
c) some jeans.

Georgie
OK. Well, let's listen... Well, that sounded a bit hairy, so I'm going to go with b) a beard.

Neil
Well, we'll find out at the end of the programme.

Georgie
So, Neil, I mentioned that my jumper was a bit **itchy** but sometimes I feel **itchy** for no particular reason. So, what's going on there?

Neil
Well, that's something that the listeners of BBC World Service programme CrowdScience also wondered. They wanted to know the answer to that. The presenter, Anand Jagatia, spoke to **itching** expert Sonja Ständer to find out more. Let's listen.

Anand Jagatia
There's lots of science to **unpack** here. Sonja, what actually is **itchiness**?

Sonja Ständer
Yeah. So, by **scratching** the skin, we remove **parasites** or plants or anything that does not belong on the skin. And so, we start to **scratch** at the very same area where we **itch** and remove it. And it can no longer damage the skin and harm ourselves.

Georgie
Anand says there's a lot of science to **unpack** about **itchiness**. **Unpack** here means explain.

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Neil
Sonja explains that when our skin feels **itchy**, we **scratch** it, and that helps to get rid of **parasites** and other harmful things on our skin. **Parasites** are animals or plants that live on another animal and feed from them.

Georgie
So, Neil, **itching** is our skin's way of protecting itself against harmful **parasites**. And I have to say, all of this talk of **itching** and **scratching** is making me feel a bit **itchy** right now.

Neil
Well, that's interesting because Dr Henning Holle wanted to study whether just thinking about **itching** makes us more likely to feel **itchy**.

Georgie
Henning and his team studied what happened when people watched videos of **itching** and **scratching**.

Neil
Let's listen to him speaking to BBC World Service programme CrowdScience.

Dr Henning Holle
And what we found in this study was, yes, these **scratching** videos indeed made people feel **itchier**. They also started to **scratch** themselves more **spontaneously**. So, the answer is basically yes, you can **catch** a **scratch**.

Neil
In Henning's study, when people watched videos of **scratching**, they **scratched** themselves **spontaneously**. If you do something **spontaneously**, you do it without being asked or without thinking.

Georgie
So, Henning concludes that yes, you can **catch** a **scratch**, just like you might **catch** an illness. **Catch** in this context means get from someone else.

Neil
OK. Georgie, I think it's time for the answer to my quiz question. We had a clip of people **scratching** and you had to decide what is being **scratched**.

Georgie
I said that was a beard.

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Neil
OK. Well, let's see if the people who are listening to this on the programme CrowdScience agreed.

Sonja Ständer
It sounds like hairy skin so I would go for the scalp.

Anand Jagatia
Yeah, I think it's beard or something because it does sound like there's hair there.

Dr Henning Holle
It is definitely hairy skin and Anand was spot on. So, it is indeed a beard **scratch** that we were listening to.

Anand Jagatia
Wow!

Georgie
So I was right!

Neil
You were. Congratulations!

Georgie
OK. Let's recap the vocabulary we learned in this programme, starting with **itch**, which is an unpleasant feeling on your skin. And something can be described using the adjective **itchy**.

Neil
When you feel an **itch**, you often **scratch** it with your fingers by rubbing your nails on the skin.

Georgie
If you **unpack** an idea or scientific concept, you explain it in clear detail.

Neil
A **parasite** is an animal or plant that lives on another animal and feeds on it.

Georgie
If you do something **spontaneously**, you do it without being asked or without thinking.

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Neil
Catch can be used to mean get from someone else, such as an illness. For example, you can **catch** a cold.

Georgie
Once again, our six minutes are up, but you can test what you've learned with the worksheet on our website, bbclearningenglish.com.

Neil
Thank you for joining us and goodbye.

Georgie
Goodbye.

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VOCABULARY

itch / itchy
unpleasant feeling on your skin / feeling something unpleasant on your skin

scratch
rub your nails back and forth against something, often to relieve an itch

unpack
explain in clear detail

parasite
animal, plant or fungus that lives on another lifeform and feeds on it

spontaneously
without being asked; without thinking

catch (an illness/feeling)
get an illness or feeling from someone else

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