

### What Do Fetal Hiccups Feel Like?

Sherri Gordon | January 17, 2023



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During pregnancy, people experience a variety of rolls, kicks, jabs, and pulsating movements as their baby develops and practices for life outside the womb. One such movement that you may experience includes fetal hiccups—a rhythmic motion that can seem a little strange initially, especially if this is your first baby.

"Fetal development is an astonishing nine-month journey," explains [Thais Aliabadi, MD](#), an OB/GYN and co-founder of [Trimly](#). "The fetus meets a new developmental milestone every few weeks. In just 16 to 24 weeks, the pregnant person may experience fetal movements for the very first time. As you progress further in your pregnancy, the 'little baby kicks' become a daily norm. At times, you might feel a different type of movement that feels more rhythmic or pulsating. This can be known as fetal hiccups."

Fetal hiccups are one of those things that can be hard to imagine until you experience it. Here we remove some of the mystery surrounding fetal hiccups so that if you are currently pregnant—or planning to be—you know what to expect.

#### Why Fetal Hiccups Occur

Fetal hiccups are movements within your baby's diaphragm when they begin practicing their breathing. But, unlike newborns and infants, they are not inhaling air, says Stuart Jones, MD, FACOG, an OB/GYN and attending physician at Avina Women's Health. Instead, they are taking in amniotic fluid—the liquid that surrounds them during pregnancy.

"Fetal hiccups occur to help fetal lung maturation in utero," says Dr. Aliabadi. "In the womb, the fetus's diaphragm has not fully developed, so when the fetus inhales the [parent's] surrounding amniotic fluid, the diaphragm contracts, which leads to hiccups in utero."

## **When Do Fetal Hiccups Start?**

Although your baby's lungs begin to develop between 13 to 16 weeks, research indicates that fetal hiccups may be seen on an ultrasound as early as nine weeks. The hiccups are typically pretty frequent and then plateau across the third trimester.

Conversely, you may not notice them until later in your pregnancy, says Dr. Aliabadi. "Every pregnant [person] can experience baby hiccups at a different time. Some [people] experience fetal hiccups as soon as 16 weeks, while others notice them later at 20 weeks to 24 weeks."

When fetal hiccups do occur, they usually last an average of three and a half minutes. But some bouts of hiccups may last only one minute while others may last longer—as much as eight minutes. Whether or not you feel fetal hiccups can be affected by the positioning of your placenta, says Dr. Aliabadi. Changing positions, walking, and drinking more water also can have an effect on fetal hiccups.

"Fetal hiccups are a fun thing to feel in pregnancy or see on ultrasound," says Pietro Bortoletto, MD, MSc, a reproductive endocrinologist and director of reproductive surgery at Boston IVF. "They are short bursts of practiced breathing and are totally normal. They usually start around the second trimester and are most obvious in the third trimester."

## **What Experts and Real Parents Say**

Hiccups are similar to the rhythmic motion of breathing outside of the womb, but they occur with more force. On an ultrasound, you can see that these practice breaths cause the fetus's entire body to move in a mild jerking motion, which some pregnant people can feel—and some cannot. Just like outside the womb, these hiccups last for a short period of time, then go away on their own.

"Sometimes people do not even perceive these movements," Dr. Bortoletto says. "It's very unlikely you will feel every single hiccup. But hiccups actually happen a whole lot more than people ever realize."

When you do feel fetal hiccups, they may present as rhythmic and pulsating, says Dr. Aliabadi. "They are not random, sudden single movements like fetal kicks."

They also can be more consistent than fetal kicks. For instance, Sharon Mazel, parenting and pregnancy expert, author of the upcoming book "Bite-Sized Parenting" says that with her four pregnancies, all the fetal hiccups felt pretty much the same.

"I have four children, and their in-utero kicks felt different throughout pregnancy," she explains. "But their hiccups all felt the same—quick repetitive motions that felt like steady rhythmic twitchings. I loved feeling them, and I especially loved seeing their newborn hiccups after birth, since it reminded me of that pregnancy feeling."

Many parents also indicate that experiencing fetal hiccups can feel weird, bizarre, or even strange, especially if this is your first pregnancy and you do not know what to expect.

"With both of my kids, it felt like repetitive fluttering," explains Joanna Stephens, parent of two and founder of a parenting site called She's Your Friend. "It was the oddest sensation, but one that I would never forget."

Meanwhile, Talitha Phillips, a labor and postpartum doula and CEO of the non-profit community medical clinic Claris Health, says sometimes the fetal hiccups can feel like little, patterned bubbles or even a rhythmic heartbeat in your tummy.

"I remember thinking that something was ticking in my stomach," she says. "I felt this little tap that kept happening over, and over every other second or so."

Even the position of your baby can impact how you experience fetal hiccups. According to Eliza Savage, MS, RD, CDN, an author, registered dietitian, and associate editorial director of Verywell Fit, the position of her babies determined where she felt the hiccups.

"My first baby was breech, so I felt the hiccups closer to my belly button," she says. "But my second baby was head down, so I felt them lower in my abdomen. Fetal hiccups are the most bizarre feeling and it was so concerning that I called my OB/GYN about it."

### **Can My Baby Hiccup Too Much in the Womb?**

You may have read online or heard from others that fetal hiccups occurring late pregnancy could indicate a problem with the umbilical cord—like a compressed or prolapsed cord. But that theory is rooted in a study on sheep and has not been proven in humans. In fact, fetal hiccups are generally thought of as a good sign.

"Fetal hiccups are not a cause for concern," Dr. Jones says. "Some will ask: 'Is my baby having a seizure?' But an actual seizure [in utero] is extremely rare. Fetal hiccups are a completely different movement than a spastic movement of a seizure."

It also is generally not concerning if your baby is hiccuping a lot, Dr. Jones says. "I reassure mom that fetal hiccups are nothing to worry about. We typically see them more around 26 to 28 weeks and are a sign of fetal wellbeing."

As you progress further in your pregnancy, the occurrence of fetal hiccups may decrease as you get closer to your delivery date, Dr. Aliabad says. Pay attention to what a normal, daily fetal

movement feels like for you. If something does not feel right, trust your instincts, and contact your healthcare provider. Any concerns that you may have should be addressed immediately, she says.

## **A Word From Verywell**

Although fetal hiccups can be a weird sensation—especially if you are feeling them for the first time—they are nothing to worry about. In fact, they generally mean that your baby is doing well and developing normally. After all, fetal hiccups are a way for your baby to practice the act of breathing while in the womb.

That said, it is important to take note of your baby's movements especially as you get later in your pregnancy. Most healthcare providers will want you to track fetal kick counts—not the hiccups. These movements let them know your baby is active and doing well. Decreased movements—or anything that feels concerning—should always be reported to your provider right away. They will be able to assess the situation and determine if any action is needed.

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/fetal-hiccups-what-are-they-what-do-they-feel-like-6944731>