

Ask the expert

Q&A

Carolyn Khew

Q *Why do songs get stuck in our heads?*

A In the short story “A Literary Nightmare”, author Mark Twain encountered a jingle that haunted his mind for days.

This phenomenon is known as an earworm or a brainworm, which refers to a tune, typically with lyrics, that occurs spontaneously and lingers in the head.

Why do these catchy songs get stuck in our heads?

The late neurologist Oliver Sacks thought that earworms are usually short tunes that are peculiar, and therefore “catchy”. They are also repetitive, and hence easily memorable.

The earworm phenomenon may be related to mental control – it has been reported that people with a

high capacity for mental control typically experience shorter and fewer earworms.

In contrast, people with obsessive-compulsive disorder suffer from earworms more frequently.

How can we get rid of earworms?

Recent studies show that performing difficult tasks involving working memory (such as reading and puzzle-solving) was effective in suppressing earworms.

Another study suggests that chewing gum may help block earworms, because articulatory motor activity (or mouth movements) during chewing can interfere with recollections of auditory memory.

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