

# Oust that tune: Study details cures for earworms (Update)

January 31 2014, by Seth Borenstein

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It happens to nearly everyone: A song—let's say Abba's "Waterloo"—is stuck in your head and just won't go away.

Now science has not one but three ways to dig that dreaded earworm out. And none of them are too surprising, as researchers surveyed 18,000 residents of Finland and England and reported their findings in the journal *PLOS One*.

Researchers at the University of London found that earworm victims say you can listen to the complete song or sing it; you can just not let it bother you, or you can try using another song to shove out the offending tune.

How about "God Save the Queen"?

"A tune that's not too catchy itself might do the trick," psychology researcher Lauren Stewart of the University of London said. The British national anthem, which Stewart concedes isn't the type to get stuck in the head, was mentioned most often by the Brits as an earworm replacement. Stewart wrote that 64 specific songs were mentioned as good replacement tunes, but not many repeaters. So the anthem topped the charts with six votes.

The other replacement tunes that got multiple votes include Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon" and the standard "Happy Birthday."

Most of the time the people who replaced one tune with another reported that the second tune did not become an earworm. About one-in-nine Britons reported they tried to distract themselves with another song. Most said it usually worked.

On the other hand, more than half the Finns surveyed were more likely to just try to embrace the song, play it over or listen to the end. And that also worked at times, Stewart said.

And then there's a third group who, like Stewart, just ignore earworms because they're not bothered by them.

About 90 percent of people report earworms from time to time and Stewart said two things seem to be involved: lack of control and a brain that is sort of idling.

"People get very annoyed about being made to listen to music that they find is not to their personal taste and that they cannot control," Stewart said.

**More information:** Williamson VJ, Liikkanen LA, Jakubowski K, Stewart L (2014) Sticky Tunes: How Do People React to Involuntary Musical Imagery? *PLoS ONE* 9(1): e86170.

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