



American Expression E0360 Green around the gills

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The phrase "green around the gills" is an idiomatic expression that describes someone who appears sickly, pale, or nauseated. It suggests that the person's complexion takes on a greenish hue, similar to the color of seaweed or moss. The phrase is often used metaphorically to convey a state of physical discomfort, uneasiness, or illness.

The origin of the phrase can be traced back to seafaring communities, where sailors spent extended periods at sea facing various hardships and adverse conditions. When sailors became seasick or suffered from motion sickness, their skin would turn a pale, greenish color due to the physiological response triggered by the body's imbalance. The phrase "green around the gills" was thus born from this maritime context, describing the visible signs of seasickness.

Over time, the expression expanded beyond its nautical origins and became a common figure of speech used in everyday language. It is now used to depict a general feeling of sickness or discomfort, regardless of its connection to seasickness. Someone who is green around the gills may exhibit symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, or a generally unwell appearance, often associated with various types of illnesses or ailments.

The phrase also carries a metaphorical connotation. Beyond its literal reference to physical illness, "green around the gills" can describe a person's emotional or psychological state. It suggests that the individual is experiencing distress, anxiety, or unease, analogous to the discomfort associated with physical illness. The phrase implies that the person's demeanor or appearance reflects their inner turmoil or emotional uneasiness.

Furthermore, "green around the gills" can be used in a broader sense to describe someone who is inexperienced, nervous, or lacking confidence. Just as seasickness can make even the most seasoned sailors feel weak and vulnerable, the phrase implies that the person in question may be unaccustomed to a particular situation or lacking the necessary skills or knowledge. It suggests a sense of vulnerability or unease stemming from unfamiliar territory.

In conclusion, the phrase "green around the gills" originated from the physical symptoms of seasickness observed among sailors. It has since evolved to describe a person's sickly appearance or general state of discomfort, extending beyond its maritime context. Whether used literally or metaphorically, the phrase captures the idea of physical illness, emotional distress, or lack of experience. It serves as a vivid expression to convey someone's unwell or uneasy state, highlighting the visual and metaphorical connection between a greenish complexion and feelings of illness or unease.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some common situations or conditions that may cause someone to appear "green around the gills"? How does the phrase capture both physical and emotional discomfort?
2. How does the origin of the phrase "green around the gills" in seafaring communities contribute to its metaphorical usage in describing emotional or psychological unease? Are there other idiomatic expressions related to specific professions or contexts?
3. In what ways does the phrase "green around the gills" reflect society's perception of illness or vulnerability? How do such expressions shape our understanding and empathy towards those experiencing physical or emotional distress?
4. Can the phrase be interpreted differently across cultures? Are there alternative idiomatic expressions that convey similar meanings in other languages or regions?
5. How does the metaphorical usage of "green around the gills" extend beyond illness to describe inexperience or lack of confidence? Can you think of other idioms that capture similar concepts?