



Your official source for federal, state and local government information.

[Learn More](#)

# THE STRAIGHT DOPE

**Fighting Ignorance Since 1973**  
 (It's taking longer than we thought)

**LEARN** about Cecil Adams,  
 world's smartest human  
**READ** a random Straight  
 Dope column  
**ASK** Cecil a question

[HOME](#)
[MESSAGE BOARDS](#)
[ASK THE MASTER](#)
[BUY STUFF](#)
[WHO IS CECIL ADAMS?](#)
[ARCHIVE](#)
[BOOKS ADVERTISED ON TSD](#)



A STRAIGHT DOPE CLASSIC FROM CECIL'S STOREHOUSE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

## What physically happens to someone electrocuted in the electric chair?

May 15, 1981

Dear Cecil:

*I have a fear of, yet a morbid curiosity about, execution by electrocution. How does one get in to see an execution? What preparations go on before an execution? What happens to the prisoner before and after? What physically happens to the prisoner during an electrocution? Has anyone ever been strapped in, then taken out? Are there tours of Death Houses at prisons? Please try to be as detailed as possible.*

— Scared Stiff in the Chair, Chicago

Cecil replies:

— Brought to you by Wiki44 —

Great. Another nut case. Ordinarily I try to avoid inquiries from the mentally unbalanced, but this time I'm going to make an exception, in hopes of stamping out any incipient enthusiasm for the barbaric practice alluded to above. The squeamish are advised to avert their eyes.

**Build inexpensive solar panels and power generators at your home and save up to 90% on your power bill!**

[www.make-solar-panel-in-3-hours.com](http://www.make-solar-panel-in-3-hours.com)

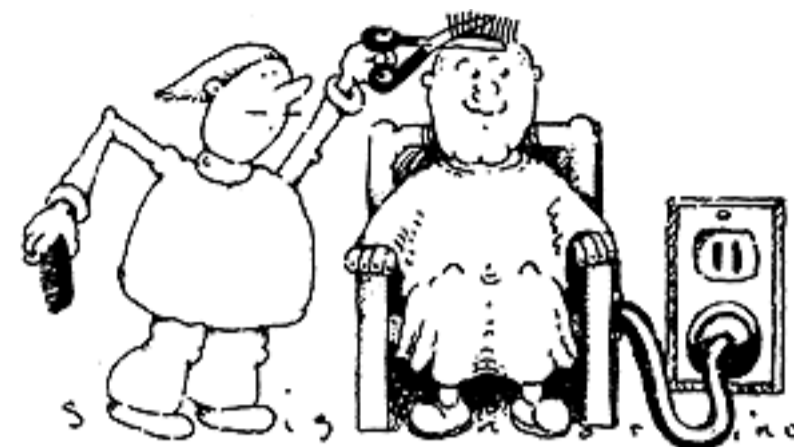
Now then, clown, suppose we wish to electrocute somebody. Suppose it is yourself. Around midnight (this schedule for purposes of illustration only; times vary from state to state) we transfer you from Death Row to a cell next to the death chamber. At 5 AM or so we shave the top of your head and the calf of one of your legs, so as to permit better contact with the electrodes. A couple hours later we read you the death warrant. A few hours after that we take you into the electrocution chamber and strap you into the chair at the wrists, waist, and ankles, in the presence of witnesses. (Again, the exact number varies from state to state. Sometimes the witnesses view the proceedings from behind a one-way window.) Electrodes are clamped to head and leg.

At the designated hour, an electrician throws a switch and a high-voltage alternating current surges through your body for two or three minutes-- typically starting at 2,000 volts at 5 amps, with the voltage varied periodically. Your muscles will instantly contract to a state of absolute rigidity, causing your heart and lungs to stop immediately. Some medical observers go so far as to say your blood will boil. If the guards have been careless and bolted you in too loosely, an arc may jump from the electrode to your body, searing your flesh. If you're lucky, you die promptly. If not, you get another jolt. Nobody, to my knowledge, has ever survived this process. By and by the doctors examine your remains and certify your decease.

Many years of scientific experiment have gone into making electrocution the refined art it is today. First suggested in the 1880s as a humane alternative to hanging, the practice figured prominently in the dispute between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse over the merits of direct vs. alternating current. Claiming the latter was too dangerous, Edison thought to prove his point graphically by equipping Sing Sing's new electric chair with one of the competition's AC generators, an application for which it proved to be admirably suited. Unfortunately, upon being presented with their first prospective victim, one William Kemmler (he had murdered his girlfriend), the executioners seriously underestimated the amount of juice required. They burned him for a mere 17 seconds, at the conclusion of which Kemmler was still twitching slightly. The current was thereupon reapplied for another 70 seconds, causing one of the electrodes to smoke. Westinghouse later commented, "They could have done better with an ax." Still, Kemmler could safely be said to have expired, and a new era was born.

Offhand I can't think of anybody who was strapped in only to be taken out later, although I do know of a prisoner in California who had been placed in the gas chamber when a reprieve was phoned in--too late, as it turned out. Another guy in Texas got a reprieve while on the gurney with an IV in his arm waiting for a lethal injection. (He was executed six months later.) I am not aware of any tours, and I am not particularly interested in learning of any. Witnesses, incidentally, are usually reporters, officials, and the like; persons who are assholes, such as yourself, are not permitted to participate.

— Cecil Adams

[COMMENT ON THIS ANSWER](#)


Espritline.

詳しくは  
コチラ

気がついたら  
英語が話せた!  
!?

詳しくは  
コチラ

仕事で英語に  
困らなくなった!  
!?

詳しくは  
コチラ

英語がどんどん  
好きになる!  
!?

詳しくは  
コチラ

英語力が自然に  
身についた!  
!?

### Threadspotting:

Meet you in the Straight Dope Reading Room for books and discussion.

### BEST OF THE STRAIGHT DOPE MESSAGE BOARD

Send your nominations for Threadspotting and Weird Earl's to [TubaDiva@aol.com](mailto:TubaDiva@aol.com). Do it today!

SD Chicago: Did Chicago become #1 in candy because of a fluke in shipping rates?

What's for dinner?  
Thanksgiving.

Help the happy couple dance into their new life together.

They had a prickly discussion of computer safety.  
*Submitted by Heart of Dorkness, who also helped with the tag, thanks!*

### VISIT THE STRAIGHT DOPE MESSAGE BOARD

### Recent Additions:

Is liver good for you? Isn't it full of pesticides?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Should I completely eliminate salt from my diet?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

What loathsome disease did King Herod die of?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Does exposure to aluminum cause Alzheimer's disease?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

How can racing yachts sail faster than the wind?  
*By Cecil Adams*

Did a stoned babysitter once microwave a baby?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Are apricot seeds poisonous?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

So what did happen to the settlers at Roanoke?  
*A Straight Dope Staff Report by SDSTAFF Bricker*

Do you "go down three times" before drowning?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

How did the states establish long straight borders before GPS?  
*By Cecil Adams*

In a falling elevator, could you save yourself by jumping up at the last minute?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Can man live by bread alone?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Do people really die from "spontaneous human combustion"?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Is it possible for someone to be tickled to death?  
*A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams*

Does the camera really add ten pounds? Plus: Is there any nutritional value in eating corn?  
*By Cecil Adams*

### SEARCH THE STRAIGHT DOPE ARCHIVE

Send questions for Cecil Adams to:  
[cecil@chicagoreader.com](mailto:cecil@chicagoreader.com)

Send comments about this website to:  
[webmaster@straightdope.com](mailto:webmaster@straightdope.com)

**Advertise on the Straight Dope!** Your direct line to thousands of the smartest, hippest people on the planet, plus a few total dipsticks.

Publishers - interested in subscribing to the Straight Dope? Write to: [sdsuscriptions@cln.com](mailto:sdsuscriptions@cln.com).

Copyright 1996-2009 Creative Loafing Media, Inc. All rights reserved. No material contained in this site may be republished or reposted without express written permission. The Straight Dope is a registered trademark of Creative Loafing Media, Inc.

Other Creative Loafing Media, Inc. sites:

[Creative Loafing Atlanta](#) | [Creative Loafing Charlotte](#)  
[Chicago Reader](#) | [Creative Loafing Sarasota](#) |  
[Creative Loafing Tampa](#) | [Washington City Paper](#)