



HUG IT OUT

There's more to the feel-good factor of a hug than simply the cosiness of arms wrapped around you – the health benefits are numerous. But not all of us naturally embrace physical closeness.

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

For those of us who enjoy such pleasures, there's nothing like a good hug to foster intimacy with a loved one, soothe us when we're suffering, comfort someone else, say a heartfelt goodbye, or greet a loved one after time apart.

Hugs are not only a pleasurable sensation, engaging in them bestows a whole host of physical and mental health benefits throughout our lives, from elevating our moods and de-stressing, to shoring up the immune system and regulating our heart rates.

By contrast, studies have shown loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increased risk of an

early death. Cuddling helps protect us against this outcome, and reinforces the bonds of our relationships to help maintain them. Simply put, humans are not built to be alone, and our bodies reinforce this message in various ways.

FEELING THE LOVE

A Carnegie Mellon University study examined the impact on the immune system of various forms of affection, including hugging. The researchers' aim was to discover whether people who felt loved were less likely to catch colds. The results revealed they were – the amount of social support that they felt was available to them

reduced both the risk of infection and severity of symptoms. One third of this protective effect was attributed to being hugged more frequently.

A cuddle needn't last for long to reap health rewards, says behavioural therapist Cat Outwin.

"Research has shown that hugging someone you love for 20 seconds can lower your blood pressure, slow your heart rate and improve your mood," Outwin says. "This is because the hormone oxytocin is released. It is the same hormone we are flooded with when we fall in love."

These benefits aren't confined to those in romantic relationships – you can also feel the loving effects of embracing family and friends.

"It doesn't just have to be your significant other to get these health benefits – hugging other family members like your children or close friends can also make you happier, reduce your pain, strengthen your immune system and gives a sense of safety and security," Outwin says.

You also don't have to be the one locked in the embrace to experience a boost to your wellbeing – the person giving the hug also benefits from the encounter, says clinical psychologist Dr Lillian Nejad. "When hugs are wanted, both the hugger and the recipient can experience the physical and psychological benefits of this behaviour," Nejad says.

UNWELCOME ATTENTION?

But what about hug-haters? Would they receive the same benefits, or does their anti-hug stance cancel out any health boosts they'd otherwise receive? Some people come from families that did not regularly show affection in this way or have other reasons for shunning touch from others, and this preference deserves to be respected. Ask before hugging unless you already know the person is okay with being embraced.

"Never assume someone wants to be hugged just because you do – they may have a boundary around this," says Outwin. "A hug that comes out of the blue can trigger the fight-or-flight response in some people."

This is not just a matter of them choosing to be impolite – some of us are thrown into a panic by being hugged, especially unexpectedly. Some individuals may have been exposed to violence or negative touch in the past and there are also mental health conditions that make a person

EMBRACE YOURSELF

It may sound silly but giving yourself a hug occasionally can be a good way to enhance your overall health. Research has found that after inducing pain in subjects, self-hugging relieved its effects. The authors of the study suggested this was due to the embrace sidetracking the brain by giving it additional touch signals to process and thereby lessening its focus on the pain. Research in 2015 indicated the soothing effects of the hormone oxytocin could also play a role.

To harness these effects, find a quiet place and follow these steps.

1 Cross your arms over your body and reach across your stomach or chest (whichever feels more natural for you).

2 Apply the level of pressure you'd prefer – whether intense or a softer touch.

3 Maintain the hug for as long as you like.

4 Rocking yourself back and forth may increase the soothing effect.

5 You might like to try stroking or massaging your forearms or shoulders as an alternative to self-hugging.

6 Magnify the benefits by focusing on loving thoughts toward yourself. To increase their impact, say them out loud, e.g. 'You're doing your best', 'You've got this', 'I'm proud of you' and 'I love you'.

more resistant to being touched. Cultural factors, self-esteem, and body image can also influence a person's stance on hugging.

"There are plenty of people who find that hugging increases their anxiety, makes them feel unsafe and can even produce the stress hormone cortisol," says Outwin. "This can be a characteristic of conditions such as germophobia or past trauma."

For the non-huggers among us, this can lead to awkward interactions where someone has thrown their arms wide and is coming in for an embrace, forcing the recipient to dodge out of reach, offer a handshake instead, push the person away, or submit to the unwanted contact. The good news that if hugs are off the table for someone, they can still satisfy their need for touch and affection in other ways.



"HUGGING YOUR CHILDREN OR FRIENDS CAN MAKE YOU HAPPIER, REDUCE YOUR PAIN, AND STRENGTHEN YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM."

CAT OUTWIN

"If people do not like or want hugs from other people, they may still like other forms of touch, like holding hands, a pat on the back, or a massage," says Nejad. "They may also be able to experience the benefits of hugging and physical touch through hugging their pet, covering themselves with a weighted blanket or even hugging themselves. Self-hugging is a form of self-compassion which can lead to lower cortisol levels and improved sense of safety, comfort, and wellbeing."

A MOTHER'S TOUCH

Touch is the very first sense we experience, kicking into gear at around 14 weeks in the womb. Once humans are born, the touch of their mother carries the health benefits of a lowered heart rate and improved growth of brain cell connections.

Nurturing touch during the early stages of development in a child stimulates better oxytocin reception and lower cortisol levels in areas of the brain that are crucial for regulating emotions. If infants receive enough cuddling and physical affection during these vital stages, they grow up to be less reactive to stress and less likely to exhibit anxiety symptoms. "Humans need touch to thrive from the time they are born," says Nejad. "Touch that shows caring and compassion can

improve the physical health of infants and may make them calmer and more resilient to stress. Conversely, if babies are starved of touch, they can fail to physically thrive and can develop behavioural problems."

Reduced levels of cortisol from gentle touch also help to regulate sleep patterns. Higher levels of the hormone are associated with patchy sleep and insomnia.


Our bodies retain this fundamental need for skin-to-skin contact throughout our lives. The sense of touch is divided into two separate systems. 'Fast-touch' refers to a set of nerves that quickly detect and enable you to react to fleeting contact such as an insect landing on you or touching a hot stove. On the other hand, the 'slow-touch' system is a collection of nerves called C-tactile afferents. These are the 'cuddle nerves' responsible for interpreting the emotional meaning of gentle caresses and hugs. When we engage in a hug, the C-tactile afferents at skin level communicate via the spinal cord with the brain. The body then releases feel-good hormones when we are touched that relieve stress and elicit feelings of wellbeing and connection to others.

"Touch activates specific nerves that send signals to the part of the brain that is linked to reward and compassion and triggers the release of oxytocin, endorphins and neurotransmitters, serotonin and dopamine and decreases the release of cortisol," says Nejad. "These physiological responses can foster a sense of safety, trust, cooperation, calm and connection as well as have a number of physical health benefits."

The term 'skin hunger' is used to describe a lack of physical touch and its accompanying consequences. "Also called 'touch starvation' or 'touch deprivation', skin hunger can have a number of physical and emotional consequences," says Nejad.

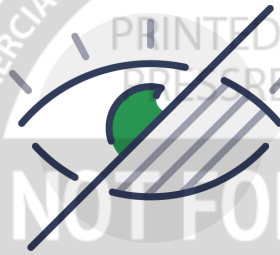
"Humans need physical touch and close relationships to thrive physically and psychologically. If humans are deprived of touch, they can experience depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, loneliness, relationship difficulties, behavioural problems, and immune system disorders."

Aside from hugs, there are ways to mitigate the consequences of skin hunger, including patting an animal, getting a massage or massaging your own scalp, or applying lotion to your face.

Overall, the evidence is clearly in favour of hugs or loving physical contact where all parties involved are enjoying the experience. It's one small way to protect your health and increase happiness all round. 

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During COVID-19 lockdowns, Icelanders were encouraged to hug trees if they had no-one in their life with whom to gain the mutual benefits of human touch. mindfood.com/iceland-benefits-hug-trees



EYE CARE FOR YOU

Could you be at risk of age-related macular degeneration?

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is an eye disease that can blur your central vision. It doesn't cause complete blindness, but it can have a major impact on focused tasks such as reading, writing and driving. It can also cause colours to look less vibrant, and people's faces may become more difficult to recognise. It is a common condition, mostly affecting older people.

While the exact cause of AMD is unknown, certain factors can increase your risk of developing the disease. These include being over the age of 50; having a family history of macular degeneration; smoking; being overweight; and having diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

There are often no symptoms associated with early to intermediate age-related macular degeneration. It isn't painful and you may not notice you have the condition until there is a significant impairment to your vision. That's why it's important to get regular eye exams to determine whether you have AMD. Optometrists play a critical role in recognising the signs and symptoms. It's particularly important if you do have a family history to get your eyes tested by an optometrist every two years from the age of 40.

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