

Patients with anorexia feel less bodily pleasure

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Patients with anorexia nervosa perceive physical touch in social interactions as less pleasurable than healthy people of the same age, reveals new research by University of Hertfordshire PhD student Laura Crucianelli. The cause of this reduced feeling of pleasantness may be a problem with a nerve system (called CT-afferents) specialised for perceiving pleasant touch.

The new research, conducted by a multi-institutional research lab (KatLab) which brings together researchers from the University of Hertfordshire, University College London and King's College London, is the first of its kind and examines a previously unexplored aspect of this condition.

Affecting mostly children and teenagers aged 10 to 19 years old, [anorexia](#) nervosa is a disorder characterised by restricted eating, fears of gaining weight, and [body](#) image distortions. It accounts for 74 per cent of all hospital admissions relating to eating disorders.

Although its origins are still unknown, patients with anorexia exhibit deficiencies in how they process social interactions, which may contribute to the onset and/or continuance of the disorder. The researchers wanted to explore whether these patients perceived CT-afferent touch as less pleasant during those interactions. Their study builds on previously established findings that these individuals report reduced experiences of pleasure, and is the first to demonstrate that this reduction could relate to a dysfunctional C Tactile afferent system.

Dr Paul Jenkinson from the School of Life and Medical Sciences at the University of Hertfordshire who co-supervised the research, comments: "Our previous research in healthy volunteers has demonstrated the importance of pleasant touch in creating a strong and healthy sense of body ownership. The current study takes this a step further and demonstrates how disorders like anorexia might be linked to a lack of pleasurable feelings coming from the body itself".

Dr Aikaterini Fotopoulou, who leads KatLab at UCL, added: "The understanding of anorexia has long been divided between scientists who believe the disorder is caused by abnormal biological mechanisms of eating and body perception and those who claim that it is caused by difficulties in social relations and emotions about the body. This study is the first step towards an integration of these views, suggesting that the ways we are touched by others may influence the biological mechanisms by which we form an emotional relation with our body."

More information: Laura Crucianelli et al. The perception of affective touch in anorexia nervosa, *Psychiatry Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychres.2016.01.078](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.01.078)

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