

The secret to a good sex life is ...

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(HealthDay)—Couples who regularly have sex tend to be happier, and now a new study suggests one reason why: affection.

The study of couples in committed relationships found what many others had shown before: Couples who had sex more often were typically happier and more content with their lives.

However, much of that link seemed to be explained not by sex itself, but by couples' general levels of affection—whether that meant cuddling or whispering sweet-nothings to each other.

It all suggests that the "relational aspects of sexuality—and more specifically, the sharing of affection—are central in understanding why sex does good," said lead researcher Anik Debrot.

That might be good news for people who worry about things like sexual performance or having a "perfect body," according to Debrot.

Instead, they could "remember that sex is a great way to share an intimate and affectionate moment with your partner," said Debrot, a research fellow at the University of Lausanne's Institute of Psychology, in Switzerland.

She was based at the University of Toronto at the time of the study.

The findings are based on four studies of couples in the United States and Switzerland. In each, couples were asked how often they had sex, and how often they shared affectionate "moments" or "touches." Two studies asked participants about their typical habits, while the other two tracked them over a specific time period.

Overall, the studies found, couples who were more sexually active tended to report greater satisfaction with life. They also had more "positive emotions"—both in general, and the morning after having sex.

But in each study, affection seemed to largely account for that sex-

happiness link.

So does that mean sex, by encouraging affection, helps breed happiness? Or do happy people have sex more often?

One of the studies suggests it may be the former: Debrot's team found that sex predicted positive emotions the next day—whereas good feelings did not boost couples' likelihood of having sex over the next 24 hours.

"This is a great study," said Robin Milhausen. She's an associate professor of family relations and human sexuality at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, Canada.

Milhausen, who wasn't involved in the research, said it "sheds light on how sex and life satisfaction are intertwined."

So while past studies have linked the frequency of sex to couples' contentment, it's actually more complicated than that, according to Milhausen.

"Sex can't be divorced from context," she said. "It's not a magic bullet. Affection, including post-sex affection, is important."

Milhausen also pointed to a particularly interesting finding: Affection mattered to both women and men—in contrast to the stereotype that men can do without the cuddling and sweet words.

Debrot agreed. "This counters the idea that 'lovey-dovey' sex would mostly be appreciated by women," she said.

Still, the research has limitations. For one, couples who volunteer for a relationship study may not be representative of couples in general,

Milhausen pointed out.

And, she stressed, it's never possible to give couples a one-size-fits-all prescription for happiness. So neither more-frequent sex nor extra cuddling and hand-holding are magic bullets.

People do vary widely in how they like to express affection, Milhausen noted. "For some people, it's hugging. For others, it's gifts of service, like putting your snow tires on for you," she said.

Debrot pointed out that no one is saying that life satisfaction depends on [affection](#) from a romantic partner. Many studies show that a range of factors contribute to any one person's well-being.

Nor does this study imply that couples get no emotional benefit from sex itself. For example, Debrot said, the physiological effects of sex—including the hormones it releases—may also boost a couple's positive feelings.

The study was published in the March issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

More information: Anik Debrot, Ph.D., research and teaching fellow, Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland; Robin Milhausen, Ph.D., associate professor, family relations and human sexuality, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada; March 2017, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*

The American Psychological Association has advice on [keeping relationships healthy](#).

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