No, a hug isn't COVID-safe. But if you have to do it, here's what to keep in mind

November 13 2020, by Lara Herrero, Elina Panahi

Credit: Priscilla Du Preez/Unsplash

In the time of COVID, greetings are no longer by handshakes, hugs or kisses on the cheek. An "elbow bump" is the preferred pandemic greeting.

Although COVID transmission in Australia is now minimal and restrictions are easing, keeping 1.5 meters apart from people outside your household is still strongly encouraged—meaning hugging is

therefore discouraged.

Some people who live alone may by now have gone months without touching or hugging another person.

While avoiding close contact with others is one of the key measures to prevent virus spread, the irony is we probably need a hug more in 2020 than ever before. So how dangerous is a hug really in the time of COVID?

Human contact is important

Our first contact in life is essentially the hug; newborn babies are constantly cradled, nursed and cuddled.

We are principally [social creatures](link), and this need for human contact continues into [childhood and adulthood](link).

Culturally, hugging plays an important role as an affectionate greeting [in many countries](link).

Its value is clearly demonstrated in European countries such as Italy, France and Spain, where hugging is common. It's little surprise many Europeans are finding the new way of living with COVID [hard to accept](link).

Australians, too, tend to hug members of their families and close social circle.

While the act of hugging may give us a feeling of happiness and security, there's actually science behind the benefits of hugging for our [mental health and well-being](link).

Research shows [skin-to-skin contact](link) from birth enables babies' early

ability to develop feelings and social skills, and reduces stress for both mother and baby.

When we hug someone, a hormone called oxytocin is released. This "cuddle hormone" fosters bonding, reduces stress and can lower blood pressure.

Positive touch, such as hugging, also releases the "happy chemical" serotonin. Low levels of serotonin, and of a related happy hormone called dopamine, can be associated with depression, anxiety and poor mental health.

Benefits of positive touch

- **Promotes dopamine release** – involved in the experience of pleasure, satisfaction and motivation
- **Promotes serotonin release** – assists in the feeling of general well-being and happiness
- **Releases oxytocin** – helps to build social bonds
- **Decreases cortisol** – involved in the body's stress response.

Impacts of a lack of positive touch

- Children who receive reduced positive touch in childhood have shown **cognitive and developmental delays**
- Serotonin deficiency is associated with symptoms of **depression and suicidal behaviour**
- **Diminished immune system function**
- **Increased stress levels.**

Credit: Wes Mountain/The Conversation, CC BY-ND

"Touch deprivation" has become a serious consequence from the pandemic and may have affected many people's mental health, particularly those living alone or in unstable relationships.

Not only are we missing out on the positive emotions a hug can provide, but we're not getting the biochemical and physiological benefits either.

Can you hug wisely?

SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, is primarily spread from person to person through respiratory droplets emitted when an infectious person coughs, sneezes, talks or even breathes.

We know we can contract COVID through close contact with an infected person, so the act itself is quite risky if you, or the person you're hugging, is infectious. But we can't always identify who has the virus, making the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission via a hug difficult to assess.

Given people who are asymptomatic and presymptomatic have been shown to be able to spread the virus, a simple hug may have serious consequences.

Ultimately, all experts agree: best practice is to avoid physical contact with people not in your own household.

If you absolutely must hug someone, there are some things you should keep in mind to minimize the risk of transmission.

6 tips to limit the risk

- Don't hug anyone showing COVID symptoms, or if you have any symptoms
- Don't hug a vulnerable person (the elderly, immunocompromised and those with other medical conditions), as these people will be at higher risk if they contract COVID

- When hugging another healthy person, avoid pressing your cheeks together; instead, turn your face in the opposite direction
- Wear a mask
- Hold your breath if you can. That way you can avoid transmitting or inhaling infectious respiratory droplets during the hug
- Wash or sanitize your hands before and after the hug

Other ways to get your warm and fuzzies

Contact with animals can provide similar mental health benefits to hugging, and also increases oxytocin. These are among the reasons pet therapy is used for people who are elderly or sick.

Maintaining social interactions and connections in the absence of direct touch can help too. Virtual gatherings can have a positive effect on people's well-being during isolation, and now we're increasingly able to gather in person again.

The pandemic has made us all realize how important social and physical contact can be to our health and well-being. While we may now appreciate the humble hug more than we did before, for the time being it's safer to seek emotional support in other ways.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation