

# Four ways touch can boost your health and well-being

April 18 2023, by Michael Banissy

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Most of us know how good it feels to receive a hug from a loved one or hold hands with a partner. But what many of us may not realize is that touch is far more than just a simple physical sensation—it's an essential element in human connection.

Touch is a fundamental human need. It affects [brain development](#), and [helps us bond](#) and build important [social relationships](#).

Touch is also extremely important for many other aspects of our health and well-being, as I detail in my latest book, "[When We Touch](#)."

## 1. Hugs can lower stress

[Whether you like](#) a short squeeze or a long cuddle, hugging can help reduce [stress](#). Research shows that both [hugs from other people and self-hugs](#) can lower cortisol levels (often known as the "stress hormone") in the body after a stressful experience.

This is important, as long-term stress can have many [adverse health effects](#). One example is [chronic inflammation](#) that can place people at greater risk of [cardiovascular disease](#) and [cancer](#). Fortunately, research has found that when people hugged their loved ones more often, it led to lower [markers of chronic inflammation](#)—even after just two weeks.

The benefits of hugs don't stop there. Regularly hugging has also been shown to [lower blood pressure](#), [decrease the risk of getting sick](#) and [improve everyday moods](#). Hugs are modest gestures with a powerful effect.

## 2. A gentle caress may reduce pain

Not only is a [gentle touch](#) or caress soothing, it may actually be able to reduce pain.

In 2018, researchers examined whether gentle stroking could help babies [cope with pain](#) when receiving a routine pinprick blood test to their heel. They found gentle stroking was associated with both reduced pain-

related brain activity and reflexive withdrawal compared to the group that did not receive [touch](#).

[Several studies in adults](#) have also shown that gentle caressing before experiencing pain induced by heat or pressure can reduce the perceived intensity of it.

The reason that this specific type of touch may be able to reduce pain is related to nerve fibers in the skin called [c-tactile afferents](#). These are particularly attuned to comforting or caregiving touch—such as gentle skin stroking—and provide a biological foundation to process affectionate touch.

When someone gently strokes our arm, for example, the c-tactile afferents on our skin are thought to release chemicals, [such as the hormone oxytocin](#), which is associated with bonding and calmness.

Ongoing work is now looking at whether c-tactile touch can be used to help with chronic pain. Results so far [have been mixed](#). One reason for this is that chronic pain can alter [how pleasant gentle stroking is perceived](#). This shows that there's more to touch than just receptors in our skin—our interpretation of the pleasantness of touch may also affect its outcomes.

### **3. Holding hands helps buffer against anxiety**

Holding hands may help reduce anxiety during scary situations.

A recent [randomized controlled trial](#) found that men who held a relative or nurse's hand while undergoing a biopsy reported feeling less anxiety and pain compared to those who didn't. [Other research](#) has also found that holding a nurse's hand during [cataract surgery](#) reduced self-reported feelings of anxiety and levels of adrenaline (a physiological marker of

anxiety) in patients.

Not only that, but studies in married couples have found that holding hands [during a scary situation](#) (in this case, under the belief that they may receive a mild electric shock) can reduce anxiety-related brain activity. This was also found to be true regardless of whether the participant held their partner's hand or a complete stranger's. But if you want to boost the anxiety-busting effects of hand-holding, studies suggest you get the most benefit from holding hands with someone you have a [closer relationship with](#).

#### **4. Massage promotes a host of benefits**

The benefits of massage are [numerous and varied](#)—including reducing stress, easing [pain](#) and boosting relaxation. The reason why massage is thought to have all these benefits is due to changes that happen in [vagal and parasympathetic nervous system activity](#).

Sometimes called the "[rest and digest](#)" system, the parasympathetic nervous system is important in promoting relaxation and restoration. It helps calm the body by counteracting the effects of stress. [Applying moderate pressure](#) to the skin during a massage can support this process, helping to regulate and relax many different body systems.

Importantly, it's not just the person receiving the massage that benefits. [Research](#) on romantic couples has also shown that massage reduces stress levels and improves mental clarity in both partners.

Naturally, only some of us enjoy being touched—and others may only prefer certain types of touch. Fortunately, many different types of touch are beneficial to us, showing that it's possible to tailor how we support one another while still reaping the benefits for our well-being.

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