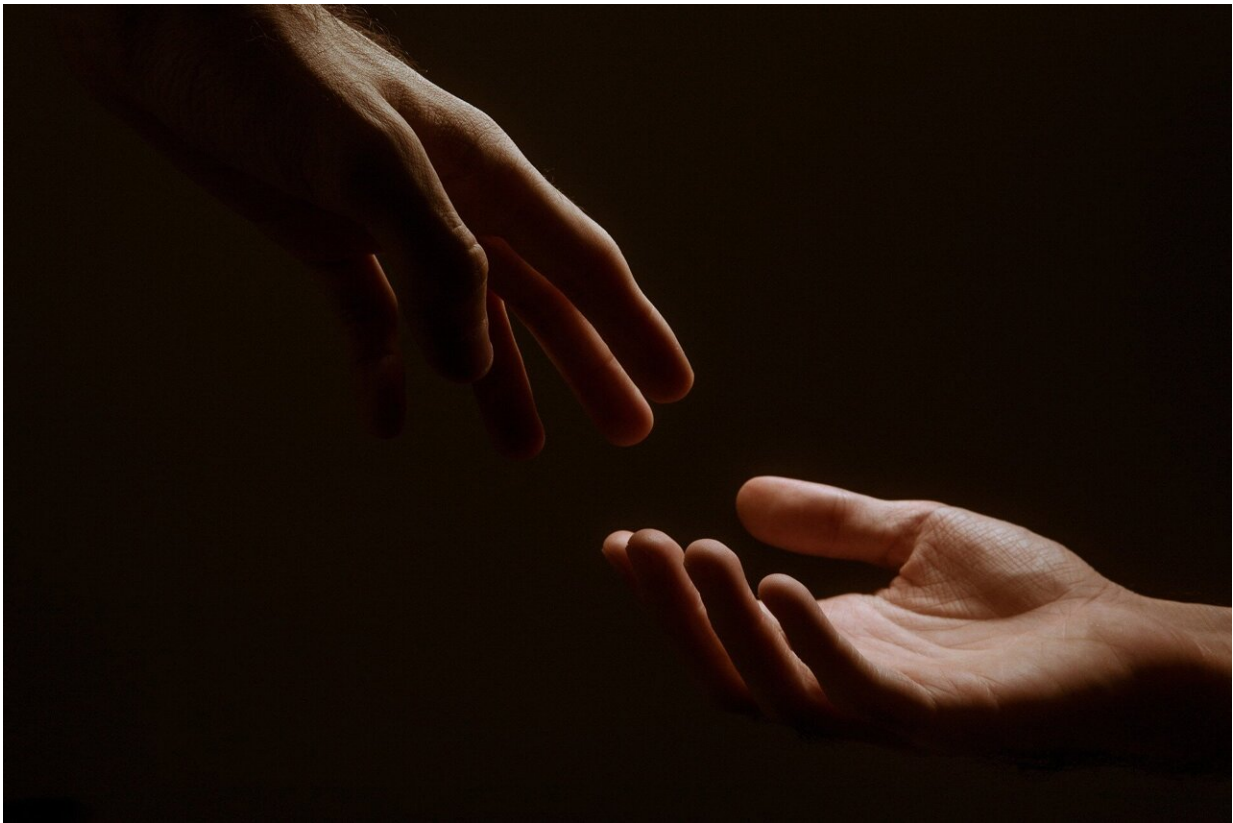


May I touch you? Being given a choice makes touch more pleasant, researchers discover

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When people are asked for consent before being touched, they have a more pleasant experience of the interaction, LMU researchers have discovered.

Consider going to a doctor for a routine checkup: In one instance, you are given the option to indicate where you would prefer to be touched on the arm during the examination. In another scenario, the doctor proceeds with the examination without seeking your input. How does this small difference affect your perception of the interaction?

Researchers at LMU, University of the Bundeswehr Munich, and Dresden University of Technology have found evidence that asking people's consent decisively influences whether they experience being touched as pleasant, even for inconsequential forms of physical contact.

[They published](#) the results of their experiments in the journal *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics*.

"Typically, consent is understood to encompass broader actions, such as agreeing to the entire examination rather than individual gestures," says doctoral candidate Lenka Gorman from the Cognition, Values, Behavior Lab at LMU. "But our experiments focus on the role of consent in moment-to-moment interactions."

The experiments were devised such that participants were gently stroked on their arm by a researcher. In some trials, participants chose aspects like where on their arm they would be touched.

To disconnect the choice from the touch, other choices were about whether to be touched with a blue or white glove. The choice offered in the latter case was therefore not really about whether and how the participants wanted to be touched. And in other trials, finally, participants were not given any say as to where and with which glove they were to be touched.

The findings were clear: When given any choice, even over incidental factors like the color of the researcher's glove, participants reported the

same touch as significantly more pleasurable. The results held across various speeds of touch, which are known to modulate their pleasantness.

Pupillometric technology also showed these choices boosted people's physiological arousal levels as they anticipated being touched. "It seems the simple act of choosing enhances how our body and mind respond to intimate contact," explains Gorman.

The results point to choice as a low-effort strategy for improving people's experiences of caring touch. As well as the obvious implications for [personal relationships](#), applications could include [clinical settings](#) such as touch-based therapies. "Providing patients more perceived control over their treatment may yield even greater benefit than currently understood," says Gorman.

Professor Ophelia Deroy, chair of philosophy of Mind at LMU and one of the lead researchers, explains, "Choice and consent are [ethical concerns](#); they're also fundamental to how we experience things. We know that choosing taps into the same dopamine system as money, food, sex, and other rewards we actively seek."

The importance of choice in increasing the enjoyment even of more passive kinds of experiences shows how crucial it is for building strong connections.

"However, our research also found that even minor choices, like picking a color, can make people more open to an experience," says Deroy.

"This makes us think about why these choices are offered, especially in marketing situations where they can be used to trick us."

Overall, the study provides new insights into how choice shapes our experiences on a fundamental level, with implications for relationships, well-being, and effective communication.

More information: Lenka Gorman et al, Choice enhances touch pleasantness, *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics* (2024). [DOI: 10.3758/s13414-024-02887-6](https://doi.org/10.3758/s13414-024-02887-6)

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