

## Science Proves That Hugs Can Boost Your Immune System by Carolyn Gregoire

We know that hugs make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. And this feeling, it turns out, could actually ward off stress and protect the immune system, according to new research from Carnegie Mellon University.

It's a well-known fact that stress can weaken the immune system. In this study, the researchers sought to determine whether hugs -- like social support more broadly -- could protect individuals from the increased susceptibility to illness brought on by the particular stress that comes with interpersonal conflict.

"We know that people experiencing ongoing conflicts with others are less able to fight off cold viruses. We also know that people who report having social support are partly protected from the effects of stress on psychological states, such as depression and anxiety," the study's lead author, psychologist Dr. Sheldon Cohen, said in a statement. "We tested whether perceptions of social support are equally effective in protecting us from stress-induced susceptibility to infection and also whether receiving hugs might partially account for those feelings of support and themselves protect a person against infection."

In the experiment, over 400 healthy adults who filled out a questionnaire about their perceived social support and also participated in a nightly phone interview for two weeks. They were asked about the frequency that they engaged in interpersonal conflict and received hugs that day.

Then, the researchers exposed the participants to a common cold virus, and monitored them to assess signs of infection. They found that both perceived social support and more frequent hugs reduced the risk of infection associated with experiencing interpersonal conflict. Regardless of whether or not they experienced social conflicts, infected participants with greater perceived social support and more frequent hugs had less severe illness symptoms.

"This suggests that being hugged by a trusted person may act as an effective means of conveying support and that increasing the frequency of hugs might be an effective means of reducing the deleterious effects of stress," Cohen said. "The apparent protective effect of hugs may be attributable to the physical contact itself or to hugging being a behavioral indicator of support and intimacy... Either way, those who receive more hugs are somewhat more protected from infection."

If you needed any more reason to go wrap your arms around someone special, consider this: Hugs also lower blood pressure, alleviate fears around death and dying, improve heart health and decrease feelings of loneliness.

The findings were published in the journal Psychological Science.