

# The Magic of Your Touch

Health Benefits of Touching Proven for Infants, the Elderly and Those In Between

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**F**or centuries, mothers have instinctively known it works -- pick up young children and they'll stop crying... gently rub babies' backs and it's off to dreamland they go. Now scientists are also coming to recognize the power of touch -- and not just touch therapies such as reflexology, but simple acts such as giving a backrub, holding hands, sharing a hug or putting your arm around someone. With research demonstrating the healing power of touch, more hospitals are incorporating massage programs into care protocols for cancer and cardiovascular patients, among others.

Tiffany Field, PhD, director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine, has studied the benefits of touch for many years. Her book, *Touch*, reviews medical and sociological research on the importance of touch to good health and also argues that the Western world, including the medical profession, has marginalized and minimized its importance. When I called her to discuss her work, Dr. Field told me that many forms of touch can help reduce pain, anxiety, depression and aggressive behavior... promote immune function and healing... lower heart rate and blood pressure... and improve air flow in asthmatics. All this, and no drug side effects!

## THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF TOUCH

Previous research has suggested that touch deprivation leads to aggression and violent behavior in animals, so it was no surprise when Dr. Field shared her concerns that living in our largely touch-deprived Western society can have negative consequences. It was these concerns that led researchers at the Touch Research Institute to examine how touch is treated differently in two cities with very different cultures -- Miami and Paris.

In one study, published in *Early Child Development and Care* in 1999, Dr. Field and her colleagues measured how much affectionate touch preschoolers received from their parents on playgrounds and also the children's level of aggressive behavior. In Paris, they found there was more touch toward peers and parents by children and less aggression. In a separate study, researchers also observed that French adolescents -- raised with more affectionate touch -- were more affectionate and less physically and verbally aggressive with one another than American adolescents. This association does not imply or prove causation, but does make a case for closer examination with further research.

## REACH OUT AND TOUCH

Dr. Field explained that the benefits of touch seem to stem largely from its ability to reduce levels of cortisol, a stress hormone manufactured by the adrenal glands. This was measured in two dozen studies. She said that touching with moderate-pressure (a firm handshake) stimulates activity in the vagus nerve, one of the 12 cranial nerves in the brain, which in turn slows the heart and decreases the production of stress hormones including cortisol.

Other studies published from the Touch Research Institute, published in peer-reviewed journals, demonstrate that touch contributes to...

- **Decreased pain.** Children with mild to moderate juvenile rheumatoid arthritis who were given massages by their parents 15 minutes per day for one month experienced less anxiety and lower cortisol levels. Over a 30-day period, parents, kids and their physicians reported less pain overall in the children.
- **Enhanced immune function.** In studies, women with breast cancer and HIV patients showed a measurable increase in natural killer cells -- part of a line of defense in the immune system against virus-infected cells and cancer cells -- after massage. They also experienced less anxiety and depression.
- **Happier, healthier babies.** Premies who were touched more while in the NICU gained more weight.
- **Less labor pain.** Women in labor who received a backrub the first 15 minutes of every hour of labor reported less pain and made fewer requests for pain medications. Their labor was also shorter, on average.
- **Enhanced alertness and performance.** Following massage, adults completed math problems in significantly less time and with fewer errors.

## TOUCH IS MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

Touching is good for the giver as well as the recipient, says Dr. Field. She cites a study in which 20 children with leukemia were given daily massages by their parents. After one month, the parents' depressed moods decreased, and the children's white blood cell and neutrophil counts increased. In another study of elderly volunteers who were trained to give massages to infants, Dr. Field found that after three weeks the seniors experienced improved mood with less anxiety or depression, decreased levels of stress hormones and more social contacts and fewer doctor visits.

## GET IN TOUCH

Touch comes more naturally to some people than others. You can make a conscious effort to bring more touch into your daily life -- and more happiness to yourself and those around you. Give your kids hugs when they leave for school in the morning and when they come home. Hold your partner's hand when you take a walk, exchange back rubs and don't forget good-night kisses. Pet your dog or cat. Schedule a few sessions with a professional massage therapist and pay attention to what feels especially good -- then try it at home on one another. Relax and enjoy.

