



PITTSBURGH (AP) — You'll get no argument from most people — especially on a cold winter's night — that hugs make you feel warm inside. But can that good feeling protect your health?

Over the past decade or so, researchers have sought to explain the positive effects credited to the nonverbal gesture of human connection. It comes alongside research that says chronic stress is linked to shorter lifespans, higher rates of heart disease and diabetes, depression and less effective immune systems.

The science takes two points of view: Hugs as a method of social support, buffering the body from stress, and hugs as a physiological experience that lowers blood pressure and levels of the stress hormone, cortisol.

Noted psychologist Sheldon Cohen of Carnegie Mellon University has led new research that reports people who experience high levels of social support and frequent hugs were protected from a higher risk of getting sick when under stress. Published last month in Psychological Science, the 404 subjects in the study — healthy people

who were exposed to flu and cold viruses — were monitored for 14 days for times of stress with other people, number of hugs and amount of viral antibodies in their blood (a sign of virus infection), and any mild or severe symptoms of illness. Since the mid-'80s, research by Cohen and others reported on the ways a social network can help a person cope with life's stressful events, including interpersonal conflicts. By 1999, research found that people who had stress from conflict with other people and were exposed to the common cold virus had a higher risk of being infected. The first part of the latest CMU study was begun in 2000.

"Our interest has been historically in social support," said Cohen. "Our lab and others have developed a lot of evidence that in people who have strong social support networks, their network will buffer them from the effects of stress."

"Less known is how that happens; how social support is conferred to people." Generally, the CMU psychologist explained, the amount of social support for a person has been measured by asking people

what support they have, not in what people do to show this support. In the recent CMU study, hugs were considered markers of close interpersonal relationships.

"In times of stress and conflict, that's when support from people in your life is important," Cohen said. "It may make less difference in other times in your life."

"Overall, other studies about nonsexual touch (have found) it can buffer acute physiological markers of stress," he said. "We wondered if it would work in the real world."

The journal article says participants with low levels of social support and more frequent interpersonal tension and conflict were found to have a greater likelihood of being infected after exposure to a virus. Both social support and hugs seemed to offset the negative effect of tension and conflict in being susceptible to getting sick.

"If you have high levels of conflict, you're more likely to get infected," Cohen said, "but you're protected from that if you have either high levels of social support or high levels of hugs."

# HUGS *and* HEALTH

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Good friends or  
good chemistry

Jill Daly,  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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