

PhysioBiz

Health newflashes

for bodies busy moving, working, playing, being.



That lovin' feeling

Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!

Is February, the Month of Love, living up to expectations this year? We might not be feeling quite as romantic as we'd like, what with worries about getting the children back to school, the financial squeeze affecting so many, concerns about what the pandemic will throw at us next, and more.

But there are things you can do to improve the situation. A whole spectrum of loving feelings – from romance to love for your dog to bonding with your baby to the closeness of good friends – are governed, at least in part, by a neuropeptide hormone called oxytocin.

Livescience noted in 2015: "Oxytocin is a hormone secreted by the posterior lobe of the pituitary gland, a pea-sized structure at the base of the brain. It's sometimes known as the 'cuddle hormone' or the 'love hormone', because it is released when people snuggle up or bond socially. Even playing with your dog can cause an oxytocin surge, according to a 2009 study published in the journal *Hormones and Behavior*."

And just FYI: there's growing evidence that decent levels of oxytocin (OT) can help to reduce appetite. "Oxytocin may also have the capacity to promote weight loss without leading to excess loss of muscle and bone...", say scientists who studied how it acted as a 'nutrient sensor' working to maintain energy balance.

The good news? There are loads of things you can do to boost your production of OT, including:

- **Hug someone**

Contact is top of the list: touch, massage, stroking and hugging all release OT, according to a large body of research. Yes, sexual intimacy raises OT nicely, but this goes much further than that; non-sexual contact between people and between people and animals does the trick too. Any form of gentle physical touch between people who trust each other increases wellbeing. For now, you'll need to stick to the people in your 'Covid bubble,' but remind yourselves to hug at least once a day.

- **Make music together**

It's been shown that "oxytocin levels were [...] raised after a singing lesson, amateur singers, in particular, expressing a heightened sense of well-being, and raised levels were also reported after choral singing. In one sensory study, it was found that listening to slow relaxing music was associated with raised salivary oxytocin levels and lower heart rate..." Sing, hum, or listen to gentle music to raise OT.

- **Share food**

Evidence from our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, shows that sharing food raises levels of oxytocin. It makes sense for humans to follow suit: research has found that "those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support". Don't eat alone; sit down together as a couple or family, establish a 'no devices at the table' rule, and boost your OT levels together!

- **Perfect pets**

"Oxytocin levels peak significantly in both dog owners and dogs when they interact and in particular when the owner strokes and caresses her dog," three scientists wrote in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2015. Many studies demonstrate powerful OT impacts of pets on people and vice versa.

If you want a dog or cat, consider going to a rescue organisation; many loved family pets are currently without homes because, in the current economic climate, their owners can't afford to keep them.

- **Get moving**

There is some evidence that aerobic exercise raises oxytocin levels. A study of martial arts athletes found "a significant increase in OT immediately after a high-intensity *randori* session", while a whole series of studies have shown that exercise induces the release of OT.

So, as Queen sang, "get on your bike and ride"! Or run, play a ball game with your children, work up a sweat painting your bedroom a cheerful colour, walk that OT-inducing doggie, anything that pushes your body just a little.

If you have any aches and pains that make moving or exercising harder, consult your physiotherapist. Find a physiotherapist at www.saphysio.co.za