

Oxytocin is a hormone made in your hypothalamus that causes feelings of love and closeness. Learn about what oxytocin does to the body here.

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You've probably heard about oxytocin and its touchy-feely reputation. But what is the "love hormone"—and how can you get more of it in your life? We're here to empower you with clear answers to all your pressing Qs.

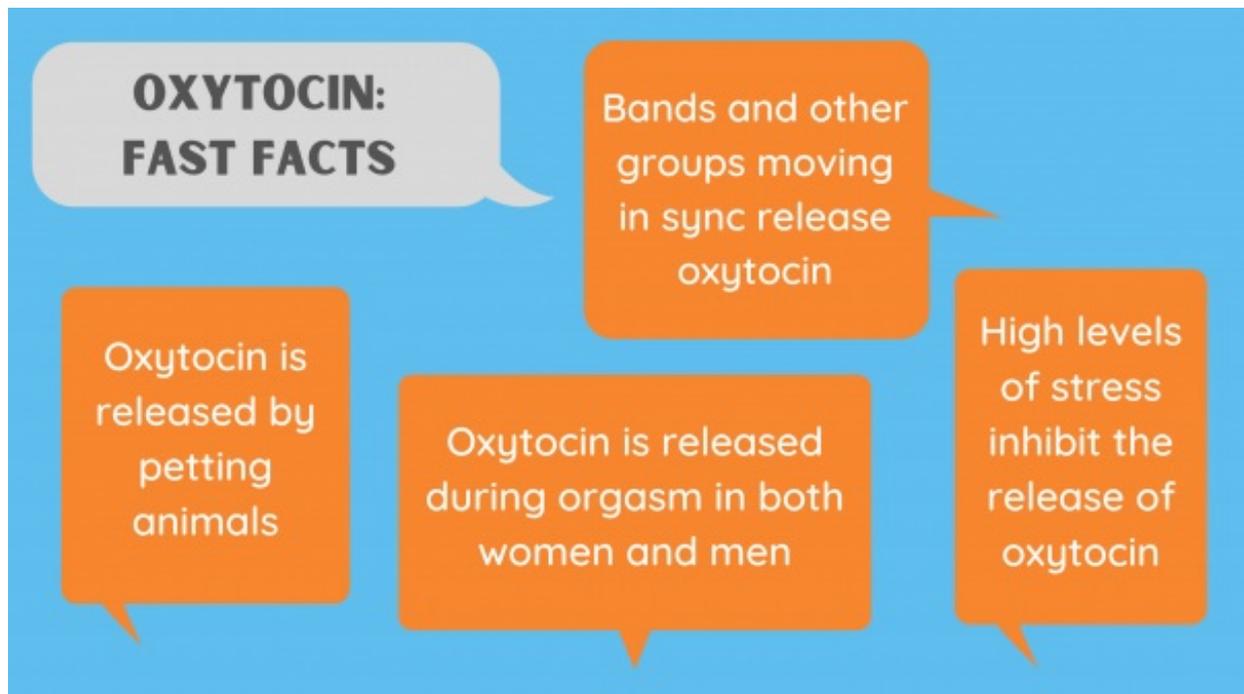
Featured Voices:

[Paul J. Zak PhD](#), [Frank Lipman MD](#), [Carol Livoti MD](#), and [Caleb McCloggan MD](#)

What is oxytocin?

Oxytocin's reputation as the "cuddle" hormone is well-earned. You know the feeling. When everything is cozy and safe, usually when you're with someone you care about. "All closeness, positive communication, and overall good emotions are connected to oxytocin," says integrative wellness specialist Frank Lipman MD. "Oxytocin gives you a warm, loving feeling. It's partially responsible for a happy mood," adds gynecologist Carol Livoti MD.

The hormone functions as a neurotransmitter, made in your hypothalamus, a small yet mighty part of your brain that's about the size of an almond. It's then secreted into your bloodstream by your pituitary gland, which regulates hormones after your hypothalamus produces them. Although there are medical reasons for the release of oxytocin, feelings of love and connection are the most common triggers of its release.



What causes the release of oxytocin?

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Oxytocin is released:

- In labor to stimulate the uterus to contract
- When a baby breastfeeds
- When touching someone you care about or when they touch you
- During hugging, kissing, intimacy, and sex
- When petting animals
- During exercise
- When surrounded by people you feel a connection with, such as friends and family

When do we release oxytocin?

“The short answer is all the time,” says Dr. Paul J. Zak, a researcher who has authored studies and books about oxytocin. “Almost every positive social interaction you have causes your brain to make oxytocin.” What’s more, its effects are on a sliding scale. If you meet someone you know and like, you release some oxytocin. However, if one of your family members or close friends comes to visit, you’re going to release much more.

Effects of the release of oxytocin in your body include feelings of:

- Empathy
- Bonding
- Positive emotion
- Trust
- Relaxation
- Fondness
- Decrease in anxiety

Oxytocin can even reduce cravings, according to an animal study with subjects who showed less interest in drugs after addiction along with easier withdrawals when given oxytocin.

“If you’re in a relationship with someone and you’re giving and getting love, this release of oxytocin increases your trust, empathy, and closeness,” Dr. Lipman says. “It’s what happens during mother-infant connection, that trust and positive bonding. And it’s not only for mothers. Fathers get a benefit as well when they hold their young children—the more they do it, the more they get.”

How can I increase my own oxytocin levels?

Touching, hugging, cuddling, and being close with friends, family, and pets all up oxytocin. “One of the ways that oxytocin makes you a better social animal is that it increases your sense of empathy and makes you more trustworthy,” says Dr. Zak. Here are some other activities that have been shown to generate and release oxytocin:

- Walking in fresh air
- Being in the sun
- Petting a dog or cat
- Socializing
- Taking part in relationships
- Getting a massage or acupuncture
- Listening to music
- Exercising
- Having physical contact with people you care about

Do pets really cause the release of oxytocin?

If you feel good around your dog, you may not realize that oxytocin is a huge part of that happiness, but it definitely is. “Pets are one of the major sources of oxytocin — dogs and cats in particular. Maybe even more so than people, because you get that reliable release, and it is pure, unconditional love,” says Dr. Lipman.

Studies show that not only do dog owners who describe their relationships with their dogs as pleasant have higher levels of oxytocin, they also have lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.

Alternatively, we know that stress can have adverse effects on our bodies and well-being. One of these negative effects that has been documented is that stress has been proven to reduce the release of oxytocin.

Is oxytocin a sex hormone?

Oxytocin plays an important role in reproduction in general. In men, it assists in the movement of sperm. During the end of pregnancy, before childbirth, it helps cause the uterus contract. “When there is not enough oxytocin released before childbirth, we

prescribe an IV infusion of Pitocin, which is an injection of oxytocin that works as labor-inducing drug,” says Dr. Livoti. Contractions also reduce blood loss, which helps to protect mothers during birth.

"Breastfeeding is one of the most potent stimuli for the release of oxytocin,” says endocrinologist Caleb McCloggan MD. “This is the reason it can feel sad for a mother when her baby weans,” says Dr. Livoti. The rapid decrease in oxytocin, after birth and after breastfeeding, can both contribute to postpartum depression.

Can you have an excess or deficiency of oxytocin?

“In rare cases, if a doctor administers oxytocin to induce labor, then the dose must be monitored, as in excess it can cause the uterus to over-contract and therefore cut off the blood supply,” says Dr. McCloggan.

According to Dr. Zak's research, there's a small population that does not produce adequate oxytocin. His studies found that approximately 5% of people didn't release oxytocin from a positive stimulus. Of that 5%, the lack of oxytocin release in about half of the study participants was because they were having a bad day.

“The other half has the personality traits of psychopaths, Dr. Zak says. There's a notorious lack of empathy.”

FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions

If this stuff is so good, then why can't I get it in a prescription of the "love drug?"

According to studies, taking oxytocin that you don't produce yourself can lead to disorienting oversensitivity. For example, if your friend made a face because they were uncomfortable from sitting in a chair for a long time, your heightened sensitivity on oxytocin could make you think, "*Oh, my friend hates me.*" We also don't know the risks of multiple doses of oxytocin over time.

Can oxytocin help people who have autism?

Recent studies have shown that people with autism tend to have lower levels of oxytocin. Scientists are using this information in new studies to determine if increasing oxytocin could have a positive impact on their quality of life.

Aren't there other “happy hormones?”

Yes. Oxytocin is just one of the hormones related to happiness, along with serotonin and dopamine.

Do people in good relationships have more oxytocin?

New research suggests that oxytocin levels are high in people in good relationships but also in those in difficult relationships, possibly because of all the emotional highs and lows that complicated relationships can bring.

Oxytocin Fast Facts

- High levels of stress inhibit the release of oxytocin
- Oxytocin is released by petting animals
- Oxytocin is released during orgasm in both women and men
- Bands and other groups moving in sync release oxytocin