

The science of love

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[Health & Science](#)

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It is February, the unofficial month of love. Beyond the obvious benefits of love, evidence shows that people in satisfying, long-term relationships fare better in terms of several aspects of overall health than those who are not. The following are just a few more reasons to find that special someone:

Fewer doctor visits: When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services analyzed various marriage and health studies, it discovered that those in positive relationships generally visited doctors less frequently. Positive relationships may help people take better care of themselves. An honest relationship can work wonders; hearing a close partner say you need to go to the doctor or that you have gained a few pounds could urge you to take better care of yourself.

Natural pain control: Several studies have shown a correlation between healthy relationships and decreased perception of pain. Using neurological functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging scans, researchers at the State University of New York at Stony Brook found that couples in love had more activity in the part of the brain that keeps pain manageable. A study conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that married people were less likely to complain of headaches and back pain. Similarly, a University study performed in 2006 found that wives who held their husbands' hands when threatened with an electric shock had a lower response to stress and felt less pain than when they had no hand to hold.

Improved immune system and improved healing: Those in happy relationships produce less cortisol, a stress hormone. Too much cortisol suppresses the immune system, making you more vulnerable to getting sick and slowing down the healing of wounds, bruises and broken bones. Increased cortisol also prompts your body to store fat around abdominal organs, which sets the stage for diabetes and heart disease.

Lower blood pressure: A study in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* found that a happy marriage could be good for a person's blood pressure. Single? Don't fret. The study also found that singles might have lower blood pressure than those in unhappy marriages. The bottom line is that those in healthy relationships generally have lower blood pressures. Other close relationships — such as with a parent, sibling or friend — impact people in similar ways.

Less depression: More than one study has shown that getting married and staying married could reduce depression. Likewise, social isolation is linked to higher rates of depression. These findings are not surprising; humans are wired to develop interpersonal relations, including those with family and friends. But don't feel too depressed if you don't have a significant other hanging around just yet. After all, aphrodisiacs — substances known to increase libido — also can contribute to your physical and emotional well-being.

Chocolate, for instance, contains phenylalanine and can increase serotonin levels in the brain.

Phenylalanine is an essential amino acid known for its antidepressant effects. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that helps control mood by improving sleep, calming anxiety and relieving depression. When it comes down to it, eating chocolate — like being in love — makes us feel better.

Oysters have long been touted as aphrodisiacs because they're high in zinc, which increases sperm count. Legend has it that Casanova would eat 50 raw oysters for breakfast.

You don't have to eat to feel good about yourself, though. An often overlooked aphrodisiac is exercise and good health. Numerous studies have shown that erectile dysfunction correlates with inactivity and poor physical health factors such as high blood pressure and diabetes (Apart from blocking your arteries, smoking is highly correlated with erectile dysfunction.) In addition to health benefits, being fit will make you more self-confident, a feeling that goes a long way whether you're single or taken.

Loving and being loved is good for your health, scientifically speaking. Not in a relationship? Get to the gym, be confident, have oysters as an appetizer and throw in some chocolate for dessert. You'll be in a healthy relationship before you know it.

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