

The Science of Happiness

Happiness is a feeling we are all familiar with, but did you know that feeling happy is linked to improving physical and emotional health? Increased happiness lowers risk for cardiovascular disease, improves immune function, benefits stress management, and prevents weight gain. Happiness is influenced by four key hormones: dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins. Hormones are chemicals that travel through the blood stream to deliver messages to influence our body processes as well as our mood. Some of these chemicals also act as neurotransmitters, which means they have effects on your brain.

What do these happy hormones do?

1. Dopamine

Dopamine is known for controlling pleasure and reward systems. It can be released when we do something we enjoy, such as exercise, shopping, sex, or eating our favourite food. Dopamine plays a major role in drug addictions due to its impact on reward centres in the brain. On the flip side, a lack of dopamine contributes to depression and is linked to Parkinson's.

2. Serotonin

Serotonin is a key hormone when it comes to regulating mood. 90% of serotonin in the body is found in the intestines while 10% is found in the brain, fostering the connection between mood and digestion. A lack of serotonin is linked to depression and most antidepressant medications work to raise serotonin levels. Serotonin also helps regulate sleep, appetite, digestion, learning, and memory.

3. Oxytocin

Oxytocin has the nickname "the love hormone." It plays a major role in childbirth, breastfeeding, and supports to the bond between parent and baby. Alternatively, the drop of oxytocin can be a contributor to post-partum depression. Oxytocin can be released with physical touch and sexual arousal, earning itself another nickname, "the cuddle hormone." Increased levels of oxytocin are associated with decreased stress and increased trust and empathy.

4. Endorphins

There are over 20 types of endorphins. They are released in times of stress or pain and are known as the body's natural painkiller. Endorphins can help boost mood, improve body image, regulate appetite, and relieve pain.

How do I boost my happy hormones?

Now for the good news. There are many ways to increase these hormones in your body. Exercise, meditation, listening to music, nature exposure, cooking and eating, and physical touch such as a hug or petting your dog can all increase production of these hormones. Use what you have learned about the science of happiness to bring some joy to your life!



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