

# Lend a helping hand

## There's nothing like a little touch and go

**D**isclaimer: This article is rated PG. The following story will contain no references to the Divinyls' infamous song "I Touch Myself." There will be no advice about which touch will lead your lover into ecstasy. In fact, this feel-good story is clean as a whistle.

Touching often is thought of as sexual, but everyday touches such as handshakes, hugs and pats on the back can be just as beneficial as the hot-and-heavy ones. Touching and massaging have both physical and emotional benefits and are even feeling their way into the medical world. But don't get all touchy-feely with everyone on the street; there are still plenty of no-no's when it comes to hands-on experiences.



Studies show that premature babies given periods of "touch therapy" gain weight faster, cry less and are not as fussy.

### And now an important message

Who in your life kneads you? Massage is gaining respect in medical environments. In Columbia, both Boone County Hospital and the Missouri Rehabilitation Center, a division of University Hospital, offer massage therapy. According to webmd.com, massage helps relieve symptoms of arthritis, gastrointestinal problems and premenstrual syndrome.

During a massage, fingertips, hands and fists are used to target soft tissues, including muscles, skin and tendons; every body is different, so the massage techniques and amount of pressure they receive should vary.

"I can tell how receptive a muscle is by how much it gives when I touch it," says Celeste Stott, a massage therapist at Salon Adair and Spa. "The more relaxed the muscle is, the deeper I can go."

When giving massages to friends, communication is key. Be aware of any medical conditions; the person receiving the massage should never be in pain. According to mayoclinic.com, too much pressure during massage can cause internal bleeding, nerve damage or temporary paralysis.

"Prior to a person receiving a massage, a patient needs to be assessed for areas to avoid — broken bones, open skin," says Laura Happe, a registered nurse at Boone County Hospital.

### Babies: Handle with care

Little ones' wails might be cries for a helping hand. Touch is a newborn's most well-attuned sense, so it's no surprise babies need comfort to combat the ongoing stress of learning how to move and think. According to a study reported in the journal *Infant Behavior and Development*, infants who were massaged gained more weight daily, had more organized sleep patterns, were less fussy and showed improved sociability. In addition, massage promoted a decrease in the babies' cortisol and norepinephrine levels, which are hormones released in times of stress, and an increase in "happy hormones."

"I'm a firm believer in massage and having contact with a baby," says Debra Gayer, an assistant professor of clinical nursing and coordinator of MU's Pediatric Nurse Practitioner area of study. "Touch is a way to help a child as a coping mechanism — to soothe and calm the child. It's a positive force in the baby's life."

If you want to massage a newborn, stay calm. Babies respond best when in a tranquil atmosphere with a nonaggressive masseuse. *The Massage Therapy Journal* stresses the importance of eye contact. Keep your head within 7 to 12 inches of the baby's face so you can be easily recognized. A moderate touch is most effective, as a light touch will produce a tickling sensation without benefits.

Make sure to talk to the baby so he or she isn't startled by the first touch. Baby knows best, so a reaction such as blocking your hand or avoiding eye contact is a cue to skip certain body parts.

### Different faces, different spaces

Even though the benefits of touch are numerous, in this litigation-loving country it is rarely acceptable to let your fingers do the talking. Children and those working with children need to know what is and isn't appropriate. To that end, the Columbia Public School counselors hold informational sessions to teach kids about comfortable and uncomfortable touches and how to handle unwanted physical contact.

Touching "is something that most teachers will think about every day," says Sarah Sadewhite, a guidance counselor at Paxton Keeley Elementary School. "I think most of us wait for the student to let us know what they prefer. If a student comes in every morning and gives their teacher a hug, then that lets the teacher know what that student likes."

The workplace is even shakier ground when it comes to physical interaction. In 2005, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 12,679 charges of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment includes unwelcome sexual advances, from back rubs to asking for sex.

## Hands across the world

**P**hysical contact is a touchy subject, especially when you're in a foreign country. Don't let fear keep you from getting near, but be cautious about your moves. The right touch in one country might be a slap in the face in another.

### France: Kiss me, you fool

When in the country of "ooh la la's," always pucker up. Kissing on the cheek is a traditional greeting in France, with the number of pecks varying among cities. In Paris, a four-kiss routine is appropriate and begins on the left cheek. Smooch away; a kiss can even make your own smile brighter. According to the Massachusetts Dental Society, the saliva from a kiss cleanses plaque-causing bacteria.

### Saudi Arabia: Please, hold on

Holding hands doesn't necessarily mean you're smitten. "In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, two men walking in conversation often hold hands," says James Scott, interim director at MU's International Center. But Saudi Arabian men and women aren't so hands-on with one another; according to everyculture.com, there is a significant gender division in public, as men and women rarely interact outside their homes.

### Thailand: Not-so-happy feet

Footsy can be fun. Footsy can be flirty. But sometimes footsy is creepy. Keep your feet to yourself, or you might inadvertently offend someone. In Thailand, feet are known as the lowest part of the body, both spiritually and physically, and it's considered a rude gesture to use your feet to touch or point at people.

### China: Hands off

Touching in public will likely get you unwanted glares. Chinatoday.com reports that touching on the head is extremely offensive and that an open hand, rather than the index finger, is a more polite way to point. A simple handshake is common, but if you're wishing to convey special respect, go with the traditional bow.

SOURCES: CHINATODAY.COM; KHONKAEN.COM; BUSTEX.COM; WIKIPEDIA.ORG

"Shoulder rubs or back caresses are likely characterized as friendly but may make the recipient feel uncomfortable," says Brad Lear, an attorney at Lear and Werts L.L.P.

To be considered sexual harassment, the contact and the conditions need to be unreasonable to the average person, not just to the hypersensitive.

To be on the safe side in a business environment, stick with the handshake, says Sue Fox, author of *Etiquette for Dummies*. This means no patting or touching any part of a person's body — for example, no pats on the butt for a great presentation. High fives, however, are still in the handshake family.

Lear says the best way to approach the issue is to simply talk about it.

"If you're ever confused or worried about touching someone, don't do it," he says. "Or at the minimum, confirm that it's not making them feel uncomfortable. Just ask a simple question like, 'I don't mean to make you feel uncomfortable, but can I have a hug?'"

— JENN HUETING