

WHAT IS SKIN HUNGER?

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life

Arya M did not touch another person for three months after the country went into lockdown last year. She isolated herself in her home in Coimbatore and worked remotely. "I have been living alone for the past three years and did not find it a big deal," she says. But things changed after two months. "Over time, I missed the feeling of human touch; shaking hands, getting a pat and so on," she recollects. Finally, unable to stand the loneliness, she left her home and moved in with her parents. "It was such a relief. I still remember my mother's hug when we met," she says.

The human body is meant to touch and be touched. "When there is a deprivation of skin-to-skin touch for a prolonged period, we tend to develop a desire for it from other living beings. This is called skin hunger and is a topic much discussed now due to the pandemic," explains Vaishnaruby Shanmugaraj, senior clinical psychologist, Vazhikatti Mental Health Centre and Research Institute, Coimbatore. From the time a baby is born, it depends on touch for physical and emotional wellbeing.

"This is why doctors let mothers have skin to skin contact with their child right after birth," she explains. Human touch has many benefits. It helps calm the nervous system, boost the immune system, activate the hormone oxytocin that is critical for bonding, reduce the production of the stress hormone called cortisol, lower blood pressure and heart rate.

Sugami Ramesh, senior consultant, Clinical Psychology, Apollo Hospitals, Bengaluru says, "A lack of touch can cause loneliness, sleep disturbance, depression and anxiety but it also varies from person to person." While there isn't a replacement for human touch, there are still things that can help. Vaishnaruby recommends hugging a body pillow and massaging the back of our neck to stimulate the nerves. Sugami suggests exercise.

"It helps to decrease stress and improves sleep." Getting a pet is also a good option. "Hugging an animal will be good for you. Use a heavy blanket that puts a little pressure on your body thereby giving a feeling of being enveloped in a hug. But make sure to seek medical help if you think it is needed," she says.

In this column, we demystify the buzzwords in wellness.

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