

If Your Dog Could Talk, He'd Say 'Don't Pet Me Here'

Surprisingly, the way many people pet a dog isn't necessarily how he likes it. The two areas, in your dog's mind, that should be taboo for petting, and two other areas that can unleash feel-good emotions in both of you and help lower your blood pressure. Plus, how petting feels to your dog.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In closely-bonded human-dog pairs, sustained stroking and petting of the dog by the human triggers the release of feel-good hormones in both
- A recent study shows some forms of petting are much more beneficial and pleasurable to dogs than others
- The dogs in the study didn't enjoy having their heads or paws petted; however, they liked having their shoulders and chests petted
- To pet your dog the right way, allow him to initiate contact. Avoid reaching over or across your dog to pet him, and don't hug or otherwise constrain him

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There's been a great deal of scientific research in recent years into the ways in which dogs benefit people. And the science confirms what pet guardians have always known — our animal companions have a powerful positive impact on our emotional and physical well-being.

Owners who are closely bonded to their dogs spend a lot of time being affectionate with their pet because it feels good. As it turns out, there's a good reason for those good feelings.

Feel-Good Hormones Overflow in Closely Bonded Dogs and Humans

In a Swedish study, researchers found that owners who kissed their dogs frequently had higher levels of oxytocin than other owners. And along with kissing, there were two other very important factors that contributed to elevated levels of oxytocin:¹

1. The owners perceived their relationship with their dog to be pleasurable rather than difficult or a chore
2. They offered fewer treats to their pet, preferring to offer attention and affection instead

In another study, dog guardians were put in a sparsely furnished room and asked to sit on a rug on the floor with their pets.²

For a half hour, the owners were instructed to focus all their attention on their dogs — talk softly to them, stroke, scratch and pet them. The owners' blood was drawn at the beginning and again at the end of the 30-minute session.

The researchers found that the dog owners' blood pressure decreased, and they showed elevated levels not only of oxytocin, but also several other hormones, including:

- Beta-endorphins, which are associated with both pain relief and euphoria
- Prolactin, which promotes bonding between parent and child
- Phenylethylamine, which is increased in people involved in romantic relationships
- Dopamine, which heightens feelings of pleasure

And believe it or not, all the same hormones were also elevated in the dogs, which suggests the feelings of attachment are mutual!

Based on all the happy hormones surging through the dogs, it's clear the owners in the second study knew how to touch their pets in a way that maximized their pleasure and contentment. However, that's not always the case.

Have You Ever Wondered How Petting Feels to Your Dog?

Dog-to-dog interaction involves lots of physical contact. They do it to show affection and a desire for play, but they also make contact when trying to goad or threaten another dog.

This is why some forms of human petting elicit pleasure and a sense of calm in dogs, while other types of touching can send the wrong message.

Unless you're carefully observing her as you pet her, it's easy to inadvertently trigger negative emotions in your dog. Different types of petting, for example, a scratch behind the dog's ear or a pat on the head, feel pretty much the same to us. The dog, however, isn't necessarily having the same experience.

Recently, a team of researchers set out to evaluate the physiological and behavioral responses in dogs to determine which types of petting felt good to them, and which didn't.³

How the Study Was Conducted

The study involved 28 privately owned dogs of different breeds, ages, and backgrounds. Some dogs were obedience trained; others were not.

Each dog was fitted with a heart rate monitor and brought into a room where both the owner and a stranger were present. The owner was instructed to ignore what was going on while the stranger interacted with the dog, touching him or her in nine different ways for 30 seconds at a time. The nine different touches included:

1. Petting the shoulder
2. Petting the lateral side of the chest
3. Petting the ventral part of the neck

4. Petting and holding the lying dog on the ground
5. Holding a forepaw
6. Petting on the top of the head
7. Scratching at the base of the tail
8. Holding the collar
9. Covering the muzzle with one hand

What the Strokes Evoked

When the dogs were petted on the head or paw, they showed appeasement signals and redirected behaviors. The researchers interpreted those reactions as signs the dogs were uncomfortable. It's worth noting that appeasement signals aren't always indicators of stress. According to Whole Dog Journal:

"They are important everyday communication tools for keeping peace in social hierarchies, and are often presented in calm, stress-free interactions. They are offered in a social interaction to promote the tranquility of the group and the safety of the group's members.

*When offered in conjunction with other behaviors, they can be an indicator of stress as well."*⁴

When the dogs were constrained by being held while lying on the ground, held by the collar, or having their muzzle covered, unsurprisingly, they showed freezing and displacement behaviors. These included lifting a paw, looking or moving away, and lip licking. All the dogs also had elevated heart rates — a clear sign of stress.

When the interactions were over, the dogs immediately shook their bodies and stretched, which are signs of relief and further proof they did not enjoy being constrained, no matter how gentle the touch. The touches the dogs liked best? Having their chests and shoulders petted, and getting a nice scratch at the end of the spine just in front of the tail.

Dog Petting Tips

It's important to note the dogs in the study were being handled by strangers. Most dogs tolerate a lot more from their immediate human family members, including touching that is decidedly unnatural for canines, such as hugging and kissing.

However, it's not uncommon for dog guardians to miss their own dogs' stress signals, which can include a quick head turn or lick of the upper lip, as well as freezing in place. It can be easy to miss or misinterpret some of the more subtle canine expressions of distress.

Unfortunately, the result can be a difficult relationship between human and dog that in a worst-case scenario can even become dangerous. Suggestions for enhancing your relationship with your dog through touch:

- Let your dog initiate contact most of the time, rather than invading his personal space. Some dogs need a little time to settle themselves before getting physically close enough to be touched.

- Pet your dog gently on the chest or behind the ear closest to you (to avoid reaching over her head for the other ear). Always avoid petting that involves reaching over or across your dog.
- As a general rule, it's never a good idea to hug a dog. Some dogs tolerate it, but it's a form of constraint, which feels threatening to them.
- Stop petting your dog after a short time and see if she asks for more, or seems relieved and/or moves away.
- Watch for stress signals, including looking away, lip licking, yawning, ears back, "whale eye" (the white of the eye is showing at the corners and/or rim), lifting a paw, tail tucking, freezing, or urination. If your dog is doing one or more of these things, stop touching him and give him some space.
- Always ask the dog's human before interacting with a pet you don't know.

In all interactions with our animal companions, we should pay attention to the impact we're having on them. Each dog is an individual, and while one dog may love a vigorous rubdown, another may be completely stressed out by that type of handling.

Additionally, there are some dogs that have anxiety and fear being approached by strangers, in general. There's an organization trying to promote the identification of these dogs from a distance by using a yellow ribbon on a leash, through **The Yellow Dog Project**, which I wholeheartedly endorse.

By observing your dog's reaction to physical contact and following his lead, you can enhance your bond with him and forge a more positive relationship.

Sources and References

[VetStreet, June 24, 2013](#)

¹ [Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals, Vol 24, No 3, September 2011, p 301-315 \(15\)](#)

² [Veterinary Journal, May 2003, 165\(3\):296-301](#)

³ [Journal of Veterinary Behavior, May-June 2014, Vol 9, Iss 3, pp 93-97](#)

⁴ [Whole Dog Journal, August 2011](#)
