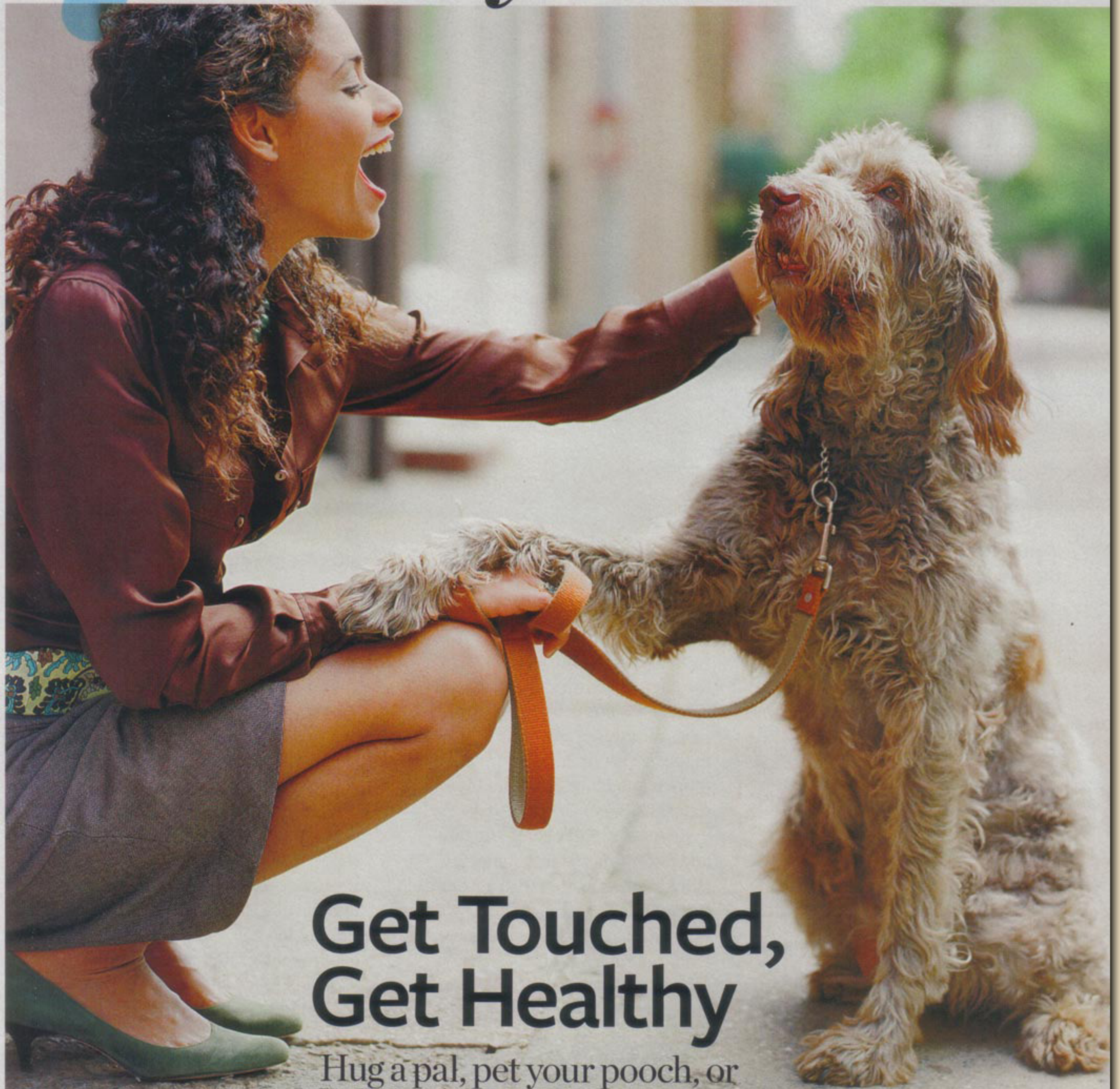




healthy *inside & out*



Get Touched, Get Healthy

Hug a pal, pet your pooch, or hold hands with your honey—it might just be the best thing you can do for yourself this winter.

By *Norine Dworkin-McDaniel* ➔

Pain reliever, heart helper, and immunity booster—all wrapped up in one furry package.

Photo: Ericka McConnell



Getting massaged for the sake of good health? That's a sacrifice we're willing to make.

WHETHER IT'S A SQUEEZE OF the hand, a big bear hug, a kneading massage, even a bedroom romp, touch is shaping up to be the ultimate mind-body medicine. From lowering blood pressure and heart rate to increasing immune function and relieving pain, getting touched or doing some touching makes you healthier—not to mention happier and less anxious. How do you tap into these body-boosting benefits? Let us count the ways.

Get a rubdown

Anyone who's ever gotten a massage—even a quickie at a mall kiosk—knows that it helps you unwind. That's not just a mental sensation: Getting massaged causes muscles to unclench, a racing heart rate to slow, heightened blood pressure to fall, and levels of the stress hormone cortisol to drop. In that relaxed state, your body is able to regroup and recharge. One happy result: a more robust immune system. "Cortisol suppresses the immune response," explains Roberta Lee, MD, vice chair of the Department of Integrative Medicine at Beth Israel

Medical Center in New York City. "Anything that increases the relaxation response triggers the restoration of your immune response." Recently, researchers measured immune function in healthy adults who got either a 45-minute Swedish massage or 45 minutes of lighter touch. The massaged group had substantially more white blood cells—including natural killer cells, which help the body fight viruses and other pathogens—and fewer types of inflammatory cytokines associated with autoimmune diseases. It's too soon to know whether regular massages will, say, keep you from catching a cold, but "it's not an unreasonable speculation," notes lead study author Mark Rapaport, MD, chair

of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles.

Hug it out

The act of embracing floods our bodies with oxytocin, a "bonding hormone" that makes people feel secure and trusting toward each other, lowers cortisol levels, and reduces stress. Women who get more hugs from their partners have higher levels of oxytocin and lower blood pressure and heart rates, according to research done at the University of North Carolina. But a hug from anyone you're close to works, too. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin at Madison tested that when they analyzed stress levels among volunteers giving a presentation. Afterward, participants who got hugs from their moms saw decreases in cortisol levels an hour after the presentation.

Hold hands with your hubby

Twining your fingers together with your one-and-only is enormously calming. James Coan, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, discovered this when he administered functional MRIs to 16 married women while telling them they might experience a mild shock. The resulting anxiety caused the images of their brain activity to light up like Christmas trees. But when the women held hands with one of the experimenters, that stress response subsided—and when they held hands with their husbands, it *really* quieted

3 REASONS TOUCH IS GOOD FOR BABIES—AND MOMS

- Massage shortens labor, and moms who get it need less pain medication.
- Babies placed skin-to-skin with their moms after birth have lower stress hormones, cry less, and are more successful at breast-feeding.
- Premies who get "kangaroo care" (snuggling skin-to-skin against a parent's bare chest) spend fewer days in the hospital neonatal intensive care unit.

