Dear Alice,

I have been hearing about pheromones and how animals use them to attract members of the opposite sex and use them for mating. People say that they work the same way for humans. Can you shed some light on whether this is true, and, if it is, where to get them?

Thanks-
Wondering

Dear Alice,

I was in a small boutique the other day and I saw a bottle of cologne that contained Pheromones. I asked the clerk what this was, and she said it is a chemical that causes women to be attracted to men. The clerk wasn't very clear on this. What exactly do Pheromones do?

Thank you,
Perplexed

Answer

Dear Wondering and Perplexed,

Pheromones are hormonal substances released by humans, animals, insects, and other organisms. These chemicals are most popularly known for their purported ability to attract or sexually stimulate a member of the same species, often of the opposite sex. For animals, insects, and other organisms, pheromones are "scents" that they can detect and interpret to help them communicate with one another. Mammals and reptiles "smell" pheromones with the aid of a tiny sensory area located inside the nose known as the vomeronasal organ (VNO). In a sense (of smell), pheromones serve as aromatic signals that can indicate sexual attraction conducive to mating behavior, a warning in advance of possible conflict, or fear. They also affect organized behaviors in insects, such as bees. As a result, pheromones are important in the reproduction and survival of a species.

People perceive pheromones differently from other animals. Humans aren't capable of
consciously detecting pheromonal scents, so there's no noticeable smell to them. Although the VNO was long considered absent in humans, recent research shows that it does exist, and that it is capable of detecting pheromonal signals. The degree to which the human body responds to these signals, however, is still in question. It has been demonstrated that stimulation of the VNO can cause a release of sex hormones known as gonadotropins, which may or may not affect mood or behavior.

Scent itself, though, can be a very important sexual stimulant. It's believed to be one of the strongest senses in its ability to trigger memory recall, behavior, mood, and association. This is because smell is the one sense that reaches brain-processing centers less filtered than sight, hearing, taste, touch, and pressure. Some fragrance companies take their products one step further and market their perfumes as containing human pheromones, banking on them as potions that'll "drive women or men wild with desire." Too bad their appealing claim is not backed up by adequate evidence to support human sexual response to pheromones. A 1998 study published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* by Winnifred B. Cutler, et al., looked at how synthesized human male pheromones "designed to improve romance" affect the sociosexual behaviors of 38 heterosexual men. The study participants who were exposed to the pheromones were more likely to engage in petting, affection, kissing, and sexual intercourse with a woman than those receiving a placebo. Masturbation did not increase. Although the results of this study suggest that human male pheromones could improve the sexual attractiveness of men to women, the researchers expressed the need for more supporting evidence. It's going to require more than one small study to confirm the human pheromone-sexual attraction connection.

Human pheromone research still holds important potential for people in other areas of study, such as in easing depression or stress and fertility control. A 1998 study published in *Nature* by Martha McClintock and Kathleen Stern looked at how pheromones affect menstrual cycles. Twenty women were exposed to pheromones collected before and after ovulation. Many of the women experienced shortened cycles with the pre-ovulation pheromones and longer ones with the post-ovulation pheromones. The researchers believe that pheromones are responsible for manipulating the monthly cycle of these women, bringing about menstrual synchrony among much of the study group. Again, although more substantial evidence is needed, results such as this one could point to the various possible, and exciting, benefits of human pheromones... in altering fertility status, assuaging bad moods, and who knows what else?

*Alice!*

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