

Questions 22-32 are based on the following passage.

This passage is adapted from Sabrina Richards, "Pleasant to the Touch." ©2012 by The Scientist.

In the early 1990s, textbooks acknowledged that humans had slow-conducting nerves, but asserted that those nerves only responded to two types of stimuli: pain and temperature. Sensations of pressure and vibration were believed to travel only along myelinated, fast-signaling nerve fibers, which also give information about location. Experiments blocking nerve fibers supported this notion.

Preventing fast fibers from firing (either by clamping the relevant nerve or by injecting the local anesthetic lidocaine) seemed to eliminate the sensation of pressure altogether, but blocking slow fibers only seemed to reduce sensitivity to warmth or a small painful shock.

Håkan Olausson and his Gothenburg University colleagues Åke Vallbo and Johan Wessberg wondered if slow fibers responsive to gentle pressure might be active in humans as well as in other mammals. In 1993, they corralled 28 young volunteers and recorded nerve signals while gently brushing the subjects' arms with their fingertips. Using a technique called microneurography, in which a fine filament is inserted into a single nerve to capture its electrical impulses, the scientists were able to measure how quickly—or slowly—the nerves fired. They showed that soft stroking prompted two different signals, one immediate and one delayed. The delay, Olausson explains, means that the signal from a gentle touch on the forearm will reach the brain about a half second later. This delay identified nerve impulses traveling at speeds characteristic of slow, unmyelinated fibers—about 1 meter/second—confirming the presence of these fibers in human hairy skin. (In contrast, fast-conducting fibers, already known to respond to touch, signal at a rate between 35 and 75 m/s.)

Then, in 1999, the group looked more closely at the characteristics of the slow fibers. They named these "low-threshold" nerves "C-tactile," or CT, fibers, said Olausson, because of their "exquisite sensitivity" to slow, gentle tactile stimulation, but unresponsiveness to noxious stimuli like pinpricks.

But why exactly humans might have such fibers, which respond only to a narrow range of rather subtle stimuli, was initially mystifying. Unlike other types of sensory nerves, CT fibers could be found

only in hairy human skin—such as the forearm and thigh. No amount of gentle stroking of hairless skin, such as the palms and soles of the feet, prompted similar activity signatures. Olausson and his colleagues decided that these fibers must be conveying a different dimension of sensory information than fast-conducting fibers.

Although microneurography can give information about how a single nerve responds to gentle brushing and pressure, it cannot tease out what aspect of sensation that fiber relays, says Olausson. He wanted to know if that same slow nerve can distinguish where the brush touches the arm, and whether it can discern the difference between a goat-hair brush and a feather. Most importantly, could that same fiber convey a pleasant sensation?

To address the question, Olausson's group sought out a patient known as G.L. who had an unusual nerve defect. More than 2 decades earlier, she had developed numbness across many parts of her body after taking penicillin to treat a cough and fever. Testing showed that she had lost responsiveness to pressure, and a nerve biopsy confirmed that G.L.'s quick-conducting fibers were gone, resulting in an inability to sense any pokes, prods, or pinpricks below her nose. But she could still sense warmth, suggesting that her slow-conducting unmyelinated fibers were intact.

Upon recruiting G.L., Olausson tested her by brushing her arm gently at the speed of between 2–10 centimeters per second. She had more trouble distinguishing the direction or pressure of the brush strokes than most subjects, but reported feeling a pleasant sensation. When the researchers tried brushing her palm, where CT fibers are not found, she felt nothing.

Olausson used functional MRI studies to examine which areas of the brain lit up when G.L.'s arm was gently brushed to activate CT fibers. In normal subjects, both the somatosensory and insular cortices were activated, but only the insular cortex [which processes emotion] was active when researchers brushed G.L.'s arm. This solidified the notion that CT fibers convey a more emotional quality of touch, rather than the conscious aspect that helps us describe what we are sensing. CT fibers, it seemed, specifically provide pleasurable sensations.

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