

www.chicagotribune.com/features/lifestyle/chi-0108\_health\_scent\_rjan08,0,148691.story

# chicagotribune.com

## HEALTH BEAT: HUMAN OLFACTORY ABILITY

### Can you smell that smell? Yes, subliminally

By Leslie Mann

Special to the Tribune

January 8, 2008

When you take a walk with your dog, you recognize a few smells, like freshly mown grass or your neighbor's rose garden. Your dog, meanwhile, revels in a cornucopia of scents at every turn.

The truth is, you are not as clueless as you think. While you may be aware of a only few scents, you detect thousands subliminally. In fact, said Jay Gottfried, assistant professor of neurology at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, you can differentiate between about 10,000 scents, even those that differ by a single atom.

Now a study by Gottfried and his colleagues lends additional scientific evidence to the relatively young science of human olfactory ability.

"We knew that we are aware of more scents subliminally than we realize, but there were few studies that helped us understand how it affects us," Gottfried explained. "This study showed us that very low levels of scents -- levels we are not even aware of -- affect our behavior."

In the study, people were asked to sniff bottles with minute amounts of three scents -- lemon (attractive), sweat (offensive) and neutral. The participants said they could not detect the scents.

Then they were shown a face with a neutral expression and asked to evaluate it. Those who had sniffed the lemon judged the face in the likable range, while those who had sniffed the sweat judged it unlikable. This is evidence, Gottfried said, that the sense of smell and its effects are underappreciated.

"We consider this sense vestigial," Gottfried said. "But it isn't. I compare it to color vision. We may not be able to name thousands of colors, but we can differentiate between that many color variations."

Ironically, when it comes to scents, Gottfried said, "less is more." If a woman douses herself with perfume, he explained, a man may dismiss her as coming on too strongly.

The study was published in the December issue of Psychological Science. Gottfried's co-authors are Wen Li and Ken Paller from Northwestern and Isabel Moallem from Loyola University.

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](#)



The Easiest Resolution  
to Keep This Year.  
Save Money With Vonage!

Over 25 Premium Features  
Included at No Extra Cost

Vonage  
A Better Way to Phone  
for Less™