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## The Jennifer Aniston brain cell: How single neurons spring into action when we see pictures of our favourite celebrities

By [Fiona Macrae](#)

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Although you didn't feel it, something strange and rather wonderful might have just happened in your brain.

If you're a devoted fan of the sitcom Friends, a 'Jennifer Aniston brain cell' could have reacted to the picture on the right.

It is one of potentially thousands of neurons which spring into action when we see a particular celebrity.

The Jennifer Aniston brain cell will react only to pictures of the Friends actress, while others might be activated by politicians, sportsmen or singers.

Even fictional characters and world landmarks can have their own cells, according to research from Leicester University.

The study contradicts the popular theory that a large network of cells is involved in processing images of people.

Instead, it appears that our brains can streamline the process by devoting individual cells to store memories of specific people or places that we see often.

It is likely we also have cells coded to recognise family members or close friends. And if we see images of our favourite celebrities regularly enough, our brains may treat them the same.

Neuroscientist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga made the discovery after showing patients being treated for epilepsy hundreds of pictures of famous people and of landmarks.

Tiny electrodes which had been implanted as part of their treatment picked up the electrical activity or 'firing' of around 100 brain cells in each person.

The tests showed that one woman had a cell which showed activity only when she was looking at pictures of Miss Aniston.

Another woman had a brain cell which responded specifically to pictures of actress Halle Berry.

Other celebrities who excited individual cells included Pamela Anderson, Oprah Winfrey and Tom Cruise.

Professor Quian Quiroga said: 'The patient with the Jennifer Aniston neuron had 19 other cells firing to different things.

'There was one firing to Pamela Anderson, another one was firing to the Tower of Pisa, another to Sydney Opera House and so on.'

The researchers found only one cell devoted to each celebrity. However, as they sampled just a fraction of the available cells, it is likely that a person's brain has a number of cells devoted to each of their favourite celebrities.

Professor Quian Quiroga has been working on his theory for more than three years.

He recently discovered that it is possible to tell whether a person is looking at a picture of Jennifer Aniston or of Halle Berry simply by monitoring their brain cells.

The academic, who will give a lecture on his findings next week, said the research could feed into the development of prosthetic limbs.



**Are you a devoted 'Friends' fan? If so, your 'Jennifer Aniston brain cell' has likely just been firing away**

It could also help scientists make a breakthrough in treating epilepsy, Alzheimer's and other serious brain conditions.

## Comments (6)

I'm obviously lacking that cell, because I don't have the slightest interest in Jennifer Aniston. Or Halle Berry, or Tom Cruise, or Oprah Winfrey, or Pamela Anderson.

Now, show me a picture of Alan Rickman, and I bet half my brain will light up.

- Lili, Chicago, USA, 29/10/2008 14:38

Paula - I love the way you've even christened your one brain cell. But remember, we use a capital letter for peoples' names. Actually, I do worry for us humans: with the women just having the one brane cell devoted to "celebrities" and us men just having the one brane cell (if Paula is to be believed) devoted, surely, to football, there ain't much hope for us. I suppose it's one rung up from an amoeba.

- Rupert Fotherington-Smythe, London, England, 29/10/2008 14:36

As a woman it is reallk useful only having one brian cell - puts us on equal terms with you men !

- Paula Skipper, REading Berkshire, 29/10/2008 11:36

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