

PERSONAL WELLNESS

It's no joke — laughter can be good for your health

By Carolyn Butler
The Washington Post

Whenever I took a tumble or scraped my knee as a child, my mother typically assessed the situation and then promptly tickled me, counseling, "Laughter is the best medicine." This trick remains remarkably effective with my own boys and, to this day, YouTube videos of laughing babies or cats playing with printers still have the power to make me feel a bit better when I'm under the weather.

But while giggling is certainly a great distraction when you're hurt or feeling low, I can't help but wonder whether the old adage is true: Can laughter really have a positive impact on health?

There is a growing body of research indicating that a good guffaw may improve immune function, help lower blood pressure, boost mood and reduce stress and depression. And despite a dearth of more rigorous, long-term studies, the sum of these findings is compelling, says cardiologist Michael Miller, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine who has researched the topic.

"We don't have any clinical outcome evidence to show that laughter will reduce heart attacks or improve overall survival. However, we do have a number of studies that have shown that there is a potential upside, in terms of vascular benefits and also overall health," he explains.

A new study from Ox-

ford University supports a long-held theory that laughter triggers an increase in endorphins, the brain chemicals that can help you feel good, distract you from pain and maybe deliver other health benefits.

The study reports on six experiments in which people watched television sitcoms or a live comedy performance, either alone or with others. The participants were then subjected to various measures that prompt discomfort, including wearing an ice-cold sleeve or a tight blood-pressure cuff and squatting against a wall for long periods. In all cases, laughing with buddies for just 15 minutes resulted in an average 10 percent increase in pain threshold.

According to lead author Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary anthropologist, these results back up prior research suggesting that people who laugh need less pain medication after surgery. She explains that if laughing "triggers endorphin activation, then it may have direct health benefits, because there is a possibility that endorphins help to 'tune' the immune system."

Still, we're not just talking about a snicker here and there. The key is that real, true, unforced laughter is "an energetic, stressful activity that stirs up all of our physiological systems ... involving strong vocalization, an increase in heart rate and blood pressure and muscle contractions all over the body," says Robert R. Provine, a neuroscientist at

the University of Maryland Baltimore County and the author of "Laughter: A Scientific Investigation." Indeed, the new Oxford study found that endorphins are released only when "we 'laugh till it hurts,'" meaning we end up running out of breath or physically exhausted, says Dunbar.

But before you work up a new stand-up routine, Provine points out that laughter often has little to do with jokes. "Real laughter is unconscious — you don't decide to laugh, it just happens," he says.

Dunbar says the most important benefit of laughter may be that it brings people together, which is clearly good for emotional health. "When you laugh, you're almost always in the presence of another person, whether they're physically present or imagined on radio or TV," agrees Provine, who has shown that laughter in social settings is 30 times as common as when a person is alone.

He says that those studying the effects of laughter need to tease out "to what extent any health benefits of laughter are associated with the social context of laughter." People are far more likely to giggle when others do (which explains laugh tracks on television sitcoms), he says. "It could be that it's the playful interaction with friends, family and lovers that makes the difference in health measures, and not the physical act of laughter itself."