

Heart benefits of a hearty laugh

Laughter is contagious. But don't worry about spreading it around. Growing research suggests that regularly getting your giggles going offers several health benefits beyond the emotional ones. Specifically, laughing appears to:

Increase blood flow. Researchers at the University of Maryland Medical Center measured the blood-moving capacity of arteries after volunteers watched humorous or stressful films. After volunteers laughed through scenes from "There's Something About Mary" their arteries expanded, but they constricted after viewing battle scenes from "Saving Private Ryan." And in a small one-year study of heart-attack patients, those who watched comedies for 30 minutes a day were less likely to suffer a second heart attack than those who did not watch funny videos.

Lower blood sugar. People with type 2 diabetes maintain better blood sugar-control after watching comic performances, research suggests. A Japanese study of 10 people with the condition suggests that might stem from beneficial changes in immune regulation that prevent damaging inflammation from undermining blood-sugar control.

Regulate the immune system. In another small study, laughter significantly reduced levels of inflammation-triggering cytokines in people with rheumatoid arthritis. Other research suggests that after viewing humorous films, people with asthma become more resistant to flareups, those with allergies suffer fewer symptoms, and children with allergic skin rashes sleep more easily. A good laugh might also stimulate production of disease-fighting T cells and natural killer cells.

Burn calories. Laughing boosts energy expenditure by 10 to 20 percent, according to Vanderbilt University researchers. They calculated that 15 minutes of hearty laughter could burn up to 40 calories, enough to shed more than 4 pounds a year if done daily.

Ease pain. Laughter contracts and relaxes muscles in the abdomen, face, and shoulders, which might ease muscle tension and spasms that contribute to pain. And the temporary distraction helps too.

Recommendation: While 4-year-olds laugh about every 4 minutes, adults do it about once an hour. So spend time each day having fun. Trade jokes, watch comedies, horse around with your kids or grandkids, or share a laugh while in line at the grocery store. It will brighten your day—and maybe provide a much-appreciated dose of mirthful medicine.



One-minute consult

Music tunes up the brain



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Why teach singing to stroke survivors?

People who have had a stroke on the left side of the brain might have expressive aphasia. They can understand speech, but they can't answer with anything more than "OK" or by echoing a few words they've just heard. However, they can often sing complete lyrics to songs. I found that if I got my patients to sing a lot, they were sometimes able to retrieve words, and if I sang with them every day, sometimes they got their speech back. If you show objects on a table to people

with aphasia, 9 times out of 10 they can't name them, but if they sing first, 9 times out of 10 they can. I've seen it over and over, but now we are in the midst of a huge study to prove it rigorously.

Does music also help other neurological ailments?

Yes. In my first student job I was assigned to a dementia unit. Half of the people were catatonic, and the other half were so agitated they had to have their hands tied so they wouldn't pull out their nasogastric tubes. In my very first session, I started singing "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." The catatonic people opened their eyes, the agitated people calmed down, and half of them started singing along with me. We have since done studies comparing music group therapy with conversational group therapy,

and while the conversation groups improve a little bit, the music groups learn and retain a lot of new material. Music is also helpful for Parkinson's disease, which causes people to freeze when they are trying to move. If they're listening to music with a rhythm that makes them feel like moving, they can initiate and continue movement as long as the music continues. It's very dramatic and happens almost instantly.

Any benefit for healthy people?

We know from research that people will work out longer and harder with music, which stimulates brain chemicals that suppress pain. And reading and performing music is probably one of the fullest brain workouts a person can have. You're engaging in physical coordination, processing and interpreting a complex written language, and doing lots of auditory processing, all at the same time. It's a great argument for early music education.