

December 2012 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames *Laughter and Your Health!*

“Laughter, *n.* An interior convulsion, producing a distortion of the features and accompanied by inarticulate noises. It is infectious and, though intermittent, incurable.” Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, 1911.

“Go ahead and give it a try. Turn the corners of your mouth up into a smile and then give a laugh, even if it feels a little forced. Once you’ve had your chuckle, take stock of how you’re feeling. Are your muscles a little less tense? Do you feel more relaxed or buoyant? That’s the natural wonder of laughing at work.”

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR00034/NSECTIONGROUP=2>

In the past few decades, researchers have investigated (albeit with small groups) the effects of laughter on health. Some short term benefits include enhancement of oxygen-rich air, stimulation of the heart, lungs, and muscles, and increases of endorphins in the brain (<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR00034>). Other short term effects include activation and relief of the stress response and soothing physical symptoms of stress. Long-term effects are thought to be related to an improved immune system (positive thoughts release neuropeptides), an increase in personal satisfaction, and relief of pain. “Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers. Laughter may also break the pain-spasm cycle common to some muscle disorders” <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR00034>. People in pain or discomfort report a lessening of the discomfort when they laugh!

Cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore found “that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease” (<http://www.umm.edu/features/laughter.htm>. “We don’t know yet why laughing protects the heart, but we know that mental stress is associated with impairment of the endothelium, the protective barrier lining our blood vessels. This can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol build-up in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack.” A significant finding was that “people with heart disease responded less humorously to everyday life situations...and they generally laughed less, even in positive situations, and they displayed more anger and hostility” (<http://www.umm.edu/features/laughter.htm#ixzz2CKr5NZWH>).

According to Provine (author of *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*), the “definitive research into the potential health benefits of laughter just hasn’t been done yet” (<http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/give-your-body-boost-with-laughter>). Studies have been small and the researchers may have had a bias of wanting to prove that laughter has benefits. Provine states that “laughter is social, so any health benefits might really come from being close with friends and family, and not the laughter itself.” “Provine has found that we’re thirty times more likely to laugh when we’re with other people than when we’re alone. People who laugh a lot may just have a strong connection to the people around them. That in itself might have health benefits.”

Further explanation of the physical effects on the body (e.g., blood flow, blood sugar levels, immune response, and relaxation and sleep) can be found at <http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/give-your-body-boost-with-laughter>. Check out this site, <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR00034>, for how to improve or gain a sense of humor: .

From *A Cowboy’s Guide to Life* by Texas Bix Bender: “Don’t Squat With Yer Spurs On!”