

Humor and Laughter: Health Benefits for Seniors & Resources

"I intend to live forever - so far, so good!" Stephen Wright

Laughing is universal; no matter how old you are, what language you speak or what your physical or mental abilities are, you can laugh.

Even people who have been accused of having no sense of humor have been caught chuckling over a funny story, unleashing a host of physical, emotional and mental health benefits for both themselves and the people around them.

What Happens When You Laugh

"Middle age is when you still believe you'll feel better in the morning." Bob Hope

Laughing triggers a number of positive physiological responses:

- Relaxation of the entire body, relieving muscle tension and stress
- Levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, drop and minimize pain and inflammation throughout the body
- The release of endorphins, natural feel-good substances that make you feel happy and content and have been proven to reduce the perception of physical pain
- Reduction in blood pressure combined with a moderate increase in the heart rate and improved blood circulation and oxygen intake
- The stimulation of the immune system thanks to the release of T-cells and salivary immunoglobulin A which is triggered by laughter.

Researchers at the College of William and Mary have found that "a wave of electricity sweeps through" the entire cerebral cortex (the whole brain) just before we laugh - this supports the theory that humor can actually help improve cognitive functioning by activating all parts of the brain simultaneously.

Health Benefits of Laughter

"You're over the hill when your back goes out more than you do." Pruneville.com

While the science of humor is a relatively new discipline, research studies on the health benefits of laughter consistently demonstrate the connection between laughing and longevity. Researchers know that laughing lowers blood pressure while increasing blood flow and oxygen intake, all positive physiological effects that have been linked to a decreased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Because laughing triggers the release of the drug-like neurochemical endorphin, laughing simply makes people feel better all over. Laughing also can have an anesthetic-like effect on the body, suppressing physical pain and discomfort for up to two hours following a hearty chuckle.

Humor and Mental Wellness

"I have been to many places, but I've never been in Cahoots. Apparently, you can't go alone. You have to be in Cahoots with someone. I've also never been in Cognito. I hear no one recognizes you there."- A Joke A Day

The ability to laugh is closely tied to having a positive outlook on life, an important protective factor against numerous mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. A [study](#) at Northwestern University revealed that patients with advanced COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) who were exposed to humorous videos enjoyed better mental health than study participants who viewed non-humorous videos, supporting the connection between mental wellness and humor.

Laughing also promotes emotional well-being, helping people maintain a positive outlook and stable mood throughout the day. Optimism has been linked to improved resiliency; the ability to cope with stressful situations in spite of numerous obstacles such as disease, financial stress or the loss of a loved one.

Humor and Aging

"The preacher came to call the other day. He said at my age I should be thinking of the hereafter. I told him, "Oh, I do it all the time. No matter where I am - in the parlor, upstairs, in the kitchen, or down in the basement - I ask myself, "Now, what am I here after?" Everythingzoomer.com

Some of the most popular jokes involve getting older, thanks to their universal appeal (everyone ages, after all). While joking about age-related changes can help ease any anxiety over aging as well as help to normalize common experiences among seniors, researchers in Norway have found that people with a sense of humor can expect to live longer than their humorless counterparts.

The study by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology examined the health records of 53,000 Norwegian seniors; it examined their overall health and length of survival in relation to their ability to see the humor in situations. Researchers discovered that after seven years, the study participants who had a "sense of humor" enjoyed a 20 percent lower mortality rate in comparison to those who had difficulty laughing at daily events.

Laughter: The Best Medicine for Chronic Conditions

"There's a silver lining to being a cancer survivor. People said to me, "Are you freaked out that you're turning 50?" Hell, no. I'm thrilled to be turning 50." Fran Drescher, Comedian/Actor

While laughing has been shown to help prevent the onset of many physical and mental illnesses, humor is also emerging as one of the most powerful medicines for chronic and degenerative conditions like dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and cancer.

[A recent study by Dr. Jean-Paul Bell](#) of Australia's Arts Health Institute tracked the effects of live comedy on elderly nursing home patients with dementia/Alzheimer's. Over a 12-week period Dr. Bell and a troupe of clowns and comedians visited 36 long-term care homes in Sydney, Australia, where they told jokes, played games and performed funny skits for the patients. For the duration of the program, staff in the nursing homes reported that participants were more positive and happier, while aggressive behaviors by the patients decreased for about 26 weeks after the program ended.

The Difference Between Happy and Harmful Humor

"The nice part about living in a small town is that when you don't know what you're doing, someone else does." Everyday Wisdom.com

When it comes to humor and laughter, it's not all fun and games. The types of things that people consider to be funny today are very different than what was viewed as humorous in the past; changes in social norms means that "clean" jokes need to focus

on poking fun at situations or the person telling the joke, rather than being sarcastic or harmful.

In general, jokes that mock a particular ethnic, religious or minority group (such as homosexuals) are no longer considered to be funny by most people, nor are jokes about [physical or mental disabilities](#). A good rule of thumb is to make fun of yourself, not others. Increasing your exposure to “clean” humor on prime-time television, online and in books will help build your comfort level with what types of jokes are considered appropriate and non-offensive.

Laughing More: How to Add Humor to Your Day

“If practice makes perfect yet nobody’s perfect, why bother practicing?” Unknown

To gain the most physical and mental health benefits from humor, try to laugh every single day. Look for ways to schedule humor into your daily routine: subscribe to a “Joke of the Day” email, read the comics in the daily newspaper or watch a funny television show. Once you make laughing a daily habit, you will begin to enjoy the numerous health benefits of humor.

Online Humor and Laughter Resources

“I’m out of bed and I made it to the keyboard - what more do you want?” Unknown

Further reading on humor and health

The Internet is filled with humor; fun videos of little and not-so-little kids doing silly things, photos with funny captions and websites that feature comical stories and jokes. Here are some online resources where you can learn more about the connection between humor and health:

[Alzheimer’s Disease: Remember to Laugh](#) - A brief paper on the value of laughter as a coping tool for both caregivers and patients affected by Alzheimer’s Disease.

[The Healing Power of Laughter](#) - An easy-to-read, presentation-ready summary on laughter, types of humor and social norms.

[The Connection Between Laughter, Humor and Good Health](#) - A printer-ready handout that summarizes the connection between health and humor.

[Humor and Laughter May Influence Health](#) - A four-part series from researchers at the College of Nursing, Indiana State University which examines the connection between health and humor.

[Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor](#) - This non-profit organization is dedicated to the promotion and advancement of therapeutic humor; they maintain an

extensive collection of humor resources and support networking between professionals through membership and an annual conference.

Humor on the Internet

[A Joke A Day](#) - Website that features new, clean jokes daily. Users can sign up to have a free joke sent to their email daily.

[Bob Hope](#) - A collection of some of Bob Hope's most popular jokes.
<http://www.bobhope.com/Joke.htm>

[Pruneville.com](#) - Website featuring pages with both "clean" and "not-so-clean" jokes targeted towards 50+ readers; content updated weekly.

[Everyday Wisdom](#) - Online collection of clean jokes and humorous short stories.

[Everything Zoomer](#) - Features a daily joke/humorous short story aimed at readers aged 50 and better.

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