

How Do You Spell Relief?

Or

Laugh Your Way to Health

Whether you peal with giggles while re-enacting the most hysterical moments of a Monty Python movie or twitter away at the highbrow humor of a New Yorker cartoon, studies have shown that your laugh will do you good. Laughter helps you deal with a variety of maladies, including the stresses of daily life.

The benefits of a belly laugh

The benefits of laughter to your health is no joke. (Pardon the pun!) A sense of humor can't cure all ailments, but data are mounting about the things that laughter can do.

Short-term benefits

A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body, beginning with your face. Laughter can:

- ★ **Stimulate your organs.** Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.
- ★ **Activate your stress response.** A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.
- ★ **Soothe tension and tummy aches.** Laughter can also ease digestion and stimulate circulation, which helps reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

Long-term benefits

Laughter isn't only good for a quick pick-me-up, though. It's also good for you over the long haul. Laughter may:

- ★ **Improve your immune system.** Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can impact your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress as well as potentially more serious illnesses. In fact, in one study, people with cancer who watched a humorous video showed less stress and an increase in a particular cell activity that's beneficial in fighting diseases such as HIV and cancer.
- ★ **Relieve pain.** Research increasingly shows that laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.
- ★ **Increase personal satisfaction.** Laughter can also make difficult situations a little bit easier. One study of nurses who work in emergency rooms found that nurses who use humor in dealing with their patients and co-workers experience greater job satisfaction and feelings of personal accomplishment than do those who remain dour during their shifts.

How to have – or gain – a sense of humor

Are you afraid you have an underdeveloped - or nonexistent - funny bone? Developing or refining your own particular sense of humor may be easier than you think.

- ★ **Put humor on your horizon.** Find a few simple items, such as photos or comic strips, that elicit a chuckle from you or others. Then hang them at home, in your office or even on the visor of your car.

- ★ **Laugh and the world laughs with you.** Develop a sense of humor about your own situation and watch your stress begin to fade away.

- ★ **Think positive.** Look for the positive or the humorous in every situation and surround yourself with others who do the same.

- ★ **Knock-knock.** Browse through your local bookstore or library's selection of joke books and get a few rib-ticklers in your repertoire that you can share with friends.

- ★ **Know what isn't funny.** Don't laugh at the expense of others. Some forms of humor are not appropriate. Use your best judgement to discern a good joke from a bad, or hurtful, one.

Laughter is the best medicine

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 hearty 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 in you.