

Take a dose of laughter

It really is the best medicine, doctors find

By SHARI RUDASKY
Gannett News Service

Hear the one about the doctor who prescribed daily laughter instead of medicine? Such thinking might be no joke.

For years, people have touted the healing power of laughter, imbuing it with a range of medicinal properties. While the jury is still out on whether laughter actually makes us better or just makes us feel better, no one disputes that laughter isn't going to hurt you.

It's one of the things that's most misunderstood in health care — that humor and laughter and silliness and playfulness is such an important part of how people heal," says Stanley Jones, a chaplain at Clarian Health, in Indianapolis, who's often seen around the hospital walking his invisible dog or pulling a rubber chicken from his pocket.

The very act of laughing can prove beneficial to one's health, says Jones, an expert in the field known as therapeutic humor. A laugh — especially a good, hearty one — requires one to breathe deeply, which delivers a rush of fresh oxygen.

But for some, the joy of laughing is sufficient.

"Do you really need science to know that laughing makes you feel better?" asks Carol Filkins, a certified laughter leader in Indianapolis, who runs workshops for the World Laughter Tour, an organization that promotes the benefits of laughter.

Scientists, however, have long sought to prove a link between laughing and better health.

Studies have supported the idea that laughter may improve pain tolerance, reduce blood sugar, boost the immune system and

provide cardiovascular benefits.

One researcher, Dr. Michael Miller, theorizes that endorphins released during laughter may "cross-talk" with the chemicals involved with vascular health, resulting in heart-healthy benefits.

Given studies that have shown that stress can take a toll on our cardiovascular health, it makes sense that laughter might improve it, says Miller, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could say, 'When you wake up in the morning, spend a few minutes not only doing pushups but laughing to release those endorphins?'" Miller said.

Some question whether there's anything really special about laughter. Maybe other behaviors, like talking, singing or even crying, have a similar effect on health.

Many note that the studies performed tend to be small. Some of the most cited work — done by California researchers on how laughter boosts the immune system — have never been published in a peer-reviewed journal, nor replicated, detractors point out.

"I don't think anyone would challenge the concept that when you laugh, you feel better," says Ed Dunkelblau, a psychologist and director of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning in Northbrook, Ill. "But as far as having hard scientific data, that's a lot tougher."

Some of the studies that found benefits to laughter contrasted it only with people sitting still, points out Robert R. Provine, a neuroscientist at the University of Maryland, Balti-



Stanley Jones, a Clarian Health chaplain specializing in therapeutic humor, shows off some smiles at Indianapolis' Methodist Hospital. Laughter helped Jones through recent cancer treatment. 'It doesn't take away my cancer — but it does help me cope,' he said.

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more County.

"I don't want to sound like laughter is not a desirable thing," says Provine, author of "Laughter: A Scientific Investigation." "But it's overhyped in a lot of what we see in popular media."

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TIPS

Go ahead — laugh at the idea that "Seinfeld" reruns will improve your health. Might do you some good. Here are a few of the benefits attributed to a good guffaw:

■ Pain doesn't seem so bad. Some studies have shown that laughter may improve pain tolerance. For instance, one found that when people were laughing, they could keep their hand immersed in ice water longer.

■ Diabetics' blood sugar may decrease. In a small study, Japanese scientists watched what happened to diabetics two hours after a meal. Their blood sugar increased by much more when they watched a lecture than when they watched a comedy routine.

■ It's good for your heart. In a 2005 study, 20 participants watched 15 minutes of "Saving Private Ryan" one day, and 15 minutes of the comedy "Kingpin" on another. Researchers then measured how well the participants' blood vessels responded when an artery was restricted, a gauge of cardiovascular health. Fourteen of 20 volunteers had a poor response after watching the Tom Hanks drama. All but one of the volunteers had a positive response to the Farrelly brothers flick.



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M0013_08Ad_057 09/2007
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