Laughter is the Best Medicine – Really, It Is.
Submitted by Terry Masek, SPHR, Metropolitan Medical Laboratory, PLC, Human Resources Officer

Humor is infectious. The sound of a good belly laugh is far more contagious than any cough, sniffle or sneeze. Laughter is strong medicine for your mind as well as your body. Humor and laughter can trigger healthy physical changes in your body, like strengthening your immune system, increasing your energy, improving your memory, enhancing your ability to learn, reducing your pain and protecting you from the damaging effects of stress. Best of all, this wonder drug is fun, free and easy to use. No prescription is necessary other than a welcoming attitude.

Laughter and exercise have much in common. Both can improve your health by supporting your immune system, improving your blood pressure and stimulating your internal organs. Laughter reduces blood sugar levels, increasing glucose tolerance in diabetics and non-diabetics alike. This can be especially beneficial for those who are bedridden, sick or cannot move well.

The effects of laughter can even help to improve your digestion by positively affecting symptoms related to conditions like irritable bowel syndrome and diverticulosis. If your job involves creativity or solving complex problems, laughter can help to improve your performance. Laughter can help to better connect speakers and audiences as well as improving the bond between relationship partners.

Laughter is a natural part of life. Infants begin smiling during the first weeks of life and laugh out loud within months of being born. Laughter is a universal means of communication. Laughter is a social thing. People are 30 times more likely to laugh in social settings than if they were alone.

**Physical Benefits of Laughter**

We all know that laughter can lift our mood and be a pleasurable activity, but how specifically can laughter be good medicine?

**It decreases stress.** Laughter helps to decrease levels of stress hormones like cortisol and epinephrine. These hormones can suppress the immune system and leave our bodies open to infection, illness and general poor health. Laughter helps to increase the activity of a type of white blood cell that attacks tumor cells and those infected with virus. Stress can also affect the production of various hormones that may have a negative immunological effect on the body.

**It improves blood pressure and flow.** Laughter has been shown to lower or balance blood pressure and to increase vascular blood flow. By improving blood circulation and increasing the oxygenation of the blood, laughter may be a powerful ally in the fight against heart disease.

**It provides a burst of exercise.** According to researchers, one minute of hearty laughter is equivalent to 10 minutes on a rowing machine or 15 minutes on a stationary bicycle from a heart-rate standpoint. Laughter can momentarily clear the respiratory system, which helps to unclog the airways and enhances inhalation and oxygen intake. Muscles of the diaphragm, abdomen, face, shoulders, back and rib area are used and have increased relaxation afterwards. A hearty laugh leaves your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes. Scientists often refer to laughter as “inner jogging.”

**It manages pain.** Laughter releases endorphins, which are the body’s natural pain relievers. They act like opiates to reduce pain and bring about a feeling of euphoria and general well-being.
It boosts the immune system. Laughter has been shown to increase levels of immunoglobulin A, an important antibody that fights bacteria and infections, especially those in the respiratory system, like colds and the flu. Other white blood cells that react positively to laughter are lymphocytes, which originate in the bone marrow and include B cells (to fight infections) and T cells (to attack viruses and manage immune responses).

Laughter Yoga

According to the Laughter Yoga Institute, Laughter Yoga is a revolutionary new technique whereby anyone can laugh without the need for comedy, jokes or humor. Yoga breathing is integrated with laughter as a form of exercise – and the resultant practice is said to deliver a variety of health benefits. Apparently, the human mind does not make a distinction between fake and genuine laughter. Even if a laugh is faked, the body detects no difference between this and “real” laughter, and the health benefits of laughter are still delivered.

Laughter Yoga is becoming both more popular and is practiced in more than 5000 social laughter clubs around the world. It’s now being offered commercially in yoga and fitness centers, assisted living facilities, schools, hospitals, businesses and government offices.

Next Steps

Now that you better understand the many benefits of laughter, how do you begin to incorporate humor and laughter into the fabric of your life, finding it naturally in everything you do?

- Smile. Smiling is the beginning of laughter – and it’s also a contagious behavior.
- When you hear laughter, move toward it. When you find the laughter, ask “what’s so funny?” and people will be more than happy to share it with you. Like yawning, laughter is contagious and the laughter of others is irresistible.
- Spend time with fun, playful people. Seek out the people who routinely find humor in everyday events. They’re in your midst every day.
- Bring humor into conversations. Ask people, “What’s the funniest thing that’s happened to you today? This week? In your life?”
- Laugh at yourself. Share your embarrassing moments.
- Try to laugh at situations rather than let the situations get the best of you. Find the absurdity in life. It’ll improve both your own mood and the moods of those around you.
- Surround yourself with reminders to lighten up. Put a small toy on your desk. Hang a funny poster on your wall. Get a goofy computer screen saver. Frame photos of yourself or your family members having a good time.
- Get a pet. Studies show that pets can help to reduce your potential for depression, stress and even heart disease.
- Keep things in perspective. Many things in life are beyond your control – especially the behavior of other people. If you’re powerless to change things, laugh at them.
- Get in touch with your inner child. Pay attention to children and behave like them. Kids know how to play, take life less seriously and laugh.

Your sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health.
Laugh and the world will laugh with you – or at least part of it will. Humor will take you to a higher place where you can view the world with a more relaxed, positive, creative, joyful and balanced perspective. Never underestimate its value.

As Metropolitan Medical Laboratory celebrates our 100th year, your good health continues to be our passion. Metropolitan Medical Laboratory, PLC, is one of the largest accredited laboratories in the states of Illinois and Iowa, and has provided this community with quality laboratory services for 100 years. Visit www.metromedlab.com and tell your doctor, “I want to go to Metro.”