

Laughter Heals

*“Patient: Doctor, doctor! My son just swallowed a roll of film!
Doctor: Don't worry. He'll be fine. Let's just wait and see what develops.”*

How does laughing improve my health?

In the 1970s, a journalist named Norman Cousins published an article about how laughing helped him heal during a serious medical illness.¹ Since then, researchers have looked into how laughter might make us healthier, and they have found that laughter helps the body in many ways. It turns out that laughter:²

- Makes our heart pump blood to the rest of our body more efficiently
- Relaxes our muscles, which can decrease pain
- Increases memory, creativity, and problem solving³
- Increases the levels of human growth hormone, which helps us grow and has other helpful actions in the body
- Lowers cortisol, the hormone our bodies make during stress
- Helps our immunity by increasing the number of cells that fight infections⁴
- Increases oxygen levels in our body by relaxing our airways and helping our breathing

All of these changes may help our body fight an illness better. Laughter also improves our happiness, which helps us cope with long-term health issues. This is done in the following three ways:³

1. Laughter increases the “feel-good” chemicals (endorphins) in our body.
2. Laughing helps increase our self-esteem and helps us feel more hopeful and optimistic.
3. Laughter makes us friendlier and improves how we interact with others. This may affect our relationships with coworkers, family, friends, or even our health care team.

“I once heard a joke about amnesia, but I forgot how it goes.”

These general body changes sound good, but does laughter help me deal with specific diseases?

Yes! Research studies have shown that if patients laugh more often, they can live better with serious, long-term diseases. Here are some examples:⁵

- **Heart disease.** People may have fewer abnormal heart beats and heart attacks.
- **Type 2 Diabetes.** Diabetics may have fewer heart attacks, less kidney injury, and better control of blood sugars after eating.
- **Chronic pain.** People may have better pain tolerance.
- **Lung diseases like asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).** People with these problems may be able to breathe better.
- **Eczema.** People seem to have fewer allergic skin changes.
- **Cholesterol.** Good cholesterol (High-density lipoprotein, or HDL) may increase.
- **Rheumatoid arthritis.** Chemicals in the blood related to pain and swelling in their joints may decrease.

- **Mental illness.** Laughter leads to less anger, depression, and anxiety.

“Did you hear about the claustrophobic astronaut? He just needed a little space.”

What are the different types of laughter?

Laughter can be broken down into two types:

1. **Spontaneous laughter.** This type of laughing happens when we react to something we genuinely find funny. Usually we are smiling and laughing out loud with those around us. This type of laughter can spread to those around us and be hard to control. Examples would be laughing at a funny joke or video.
2. **Self-induced laughter.** This means that we are trying to make ourselves laugh and are always in control of our laughter. We may force a smile or a “laughing sound” at first. Interestingly, self-induced laughter can spread to others nearby too. This can happen with Laughter Yoga, which is discussed below.

Both types of laughter can have the health effects mentioned above, and one is not necessarily healthier than the other.

“He was wheeled into the operating room, and then had a change of heart.”

How can I add laughter into my life to feel healthier?

There are many simple ways to bring laughter into your Personal Health Plan (PHP). Consider starting with the following suggestions:

- Talk to your team. Let your health care team know that you appreciate a lighter mood during a medical visit. Laughing can even help you pay attention better during an appointment.
- Make time every day to laugh with friends, family members, and coworkers.
- Surround yourself with other people who laugh often, since laughter is contagious.
- Check out a stand-up comedian on the Internet or in person at your local comedy club.
- Listen to a comedy podcast. For a list of popular comedy podcasts, see <https://player.fm/featured/comedy>
- If you are hospitalized, ask if your hospital has a clown care unit, laughter mobile, or similar program that helps bring humor to patients during a hospitalization.
- Check out the Patch Adams’ “Wounded Vet Program.” You might decide to volunteer and bring joy and humor into other people’s lives. See the Additional Resources section below for details.
- Try Laughter Yoga. This is a form of “self-induced” laughter, that was developed by a doctor in India. It offers you short and simple scripts for copying the movements, facial expressions, and sounds of spontaneous laughter without needing something to laugh at. And, in the process of copying the laughter, people start really laughing. To start this process, try a basic Laughter Yoga exercise like the one featured on the next page.



"Laughter is the best medicine, but your insurance only covers chuckles, snickers and giggles."

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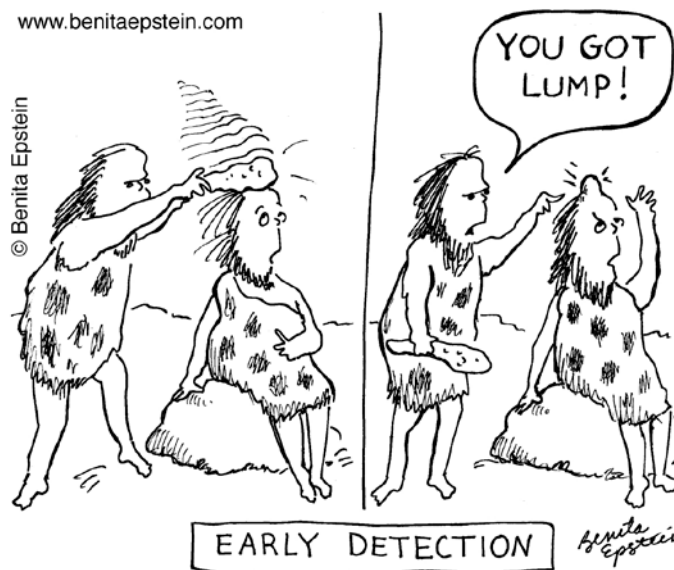


Figure 3. Reprinted with permission from Benita Epstein.

Laughter Yoga Self-Exercise Script (3 minutes)

Note: This activity might seem strange or a little uncomfortable at first, but most people find that it is a lot of fun as it progresses.

STEP 1: Just Relax

To start, just take a deep breath in and raise your arms above your head. Stretch up as if you're trying to touch the ceiling. Drop your arms down beside you with a big, loud sigh. Repeat this 3 times.

STEP 2: Practice Laughing

Start laughing with your tummy and make the sound "Ho ho ho" (like Santa Claus), patting your belly as you breathe out.

Move your laughter to your shoulders. Shake your shoulders and laugh with a "Ha ha ha" as you breathe out.

Now laugh in your throat with a big witch's cackle—"Heh heh heh"—as you stir your brew! Laugh wildly and wickedly!

Now, use your face and make the sound "Hoo hoo hoo," like a monkey as you breathe out. You can also move around the room like a monkey while you do this one, if you like.

Finally, tap the top of your head and make a really high-pitched "Hee hee hee" sound as you wave your hands in the air!

STEP 3: The Finale

Combine the 'Ho Ho Ho', 'Ha Ha Ha' and 'Hee Hee Hee' laughs with your own laughing sounds and, instead of language, use laughter to pretend one or more of the following:

- You've just won the lottery.
- You're eating very hot food.
- You're getting washed in a very cold shower.
- You're conducting an orchestra.
- You're having a conversation with someone who annoys you.

Move your body as much as you want—just remember to use laughs, not words!

When you finish this exercise, take a moment to check in with yourself. There are no right answers, but it is good to take a moment of mindful awareness.

1. What do you notice in your body?
2. What feelings are you having?
3. Would you rather do this activity alone, or with others?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of handouts on <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal Development• Mindful Awareness• Family, Friends, and Coworkers	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Laughter Yoga	General information on Laughter Yoga	www.laughteryoga.org
The Gesundheit! Institute	Link to Patch Adams' blog on Veteran Humor Projects	http://www.patchadams.org/blog/veterans/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Sagar Shah MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a document for clinicians "The Healing Benefits of Humor and Laughter" written by Adam Rindfleisch, MD.

References

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3. Mora-Ripoll R. The therapeutic value of laughter in medicine. *Altern Ther Health Med.* 2010;16(6):56-64.
4. Bennett MP, Lengacher C. Humor and Laughter May Influence Health IV. Humor and Immune Function. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med.* 2009;6(2):159-164. doi: 10.1093/ecam/nem149.
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