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American Heart Association meeting report:

Don't get mad, get funny

NEW ORLEANS, Nov. 15 – One of the best ways to protect yourself against a heart attack is to laugh often and exuberantly – even in situations that many people would find unfunny or irritating – according to a study presented today at the American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions 2000 meeting.

The study is the first to document that laughter and an active sense of humor may help influence heart and artery disease.

Researchers compared the humor responses of 150 patients, who had either suffered heart attacks or had undergone revascularization procedures such as angioplasty, to those of 150 healthy age-matched controls. Results showed that heart patients were 40 percent less likely than their healthy counterparts to laugh in a variety of common situations.

"The old axiom that 'laughter is the best medicine' appears to hold true when it comes to protecting your heart," says Michael Miller, M.D., director of the center for preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, Baltimore.

"We don't know yet if forcing yourself to laugh when you're angry is beneficial, but there may be effective, practical ways for people to lessen their discomfort or hostility to improve their humor response and increase the amount of laughter in their lives," he says. "First, it may be possible to incorporate laughter into daily activities, just as we do with other cardioprotective activities such as exercise, by reading something humorous or watching a funny video. Second, we may be able to find ways to take ourselves less seriously."

All participants in the Baltimore study were asked to answer a series of multiple-choice questions about how much – or how little – they would laugh under certain circumstances during social interactions, surprise situations and daily activities. For example:

- (1) If you arrived at a party and found someone else wearing a piece of clothing identical to yours, would you (a) not find it particularly amusing, (b) be amused but not show it outwardly, (c) smile, (d) laugh, (e) laugh heartily?