

## Heart health

# Taking humor seriously

*A light heart lives long.*

—Shakespeare

**H**ow would you react to a telephone call in the middle of the night from an old friend who was just calling to say hello? Would you be able to laugh at something funny your friend said, or not be particularly amused?

What if you were watching a TV program with friends and found one scene particularly humorous when no one else did? Would you laugh heartily, or conclude that it really wasn't funny?

If you can see the humor in a rude awakening from a well-intentioned friend, or are willing to laugh even if you laugh alone, you may be doing your health some good. Research has long associated anger and hostility with increased

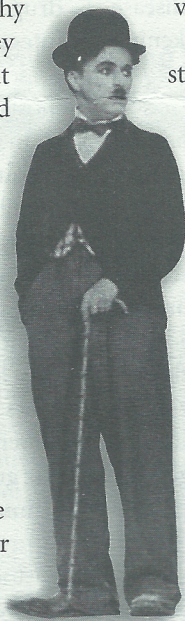
coronary-heart-disease risk. A new study from cardiologists at the University of Maryland suggests that laughter may be heart-protective.

The study, presented at a meeting of the American Heart Association, included 300 participants: half healthy and half with heart disease. They completed questionnaires about how much or how little they would laugh during various situations, such as spending a romantic evening with a date or arriving at a party to find someone else wearing an identical garment. The people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to use or see humor in these situations. They said they would laugh less—even under positive circumstances like spending time with friends—and would be more angry and hostile than their healthy counterparts.

But does the ability to laugh at life's tribulations help ward off heart trouble, or do people with heart disease tend to lose their sense of humor? Since many of the participants with heart disease had their heart attack years before this study, the researchers don't believe they were depressed or angry because of their illness. And another study of 240 heart-attack survivors suggests that even those who already have heart disease can benefit from having an active sense of humor: Participants who laughed at comedy videos for 30 minutes daily were less likely to suffer a second heart attack over the course of a year.

### LAUGHTER VS. CORTISOL

It's not clear exactly how laughter may protect the heart, says researcher Michael Miller, M.D., director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University



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## Humor yourself

**Four-year-olds chuckle every four minutes.** But adults laugh only about 15 times a day. It's all too easy to lose your sense of humor if you don't give it a regular workout.

If you think that your funny bone could use a little exercise, Dr. Miller suggests dedicating at least 30 minutes a day—as you would to exercise—to laughing. Try reading the comics, watching comedies, laughing at others' jokes, or playing with babies and children.

Laughter clearly has a social aspect to it: Research shows that people laugh more often and more heartily when they're around others. So also try spending more time with people you enjoy.

To find out how healthy your sense of humor is, take the survey used in the University of Maryland study at its web site: [www.umm.edu/news/humor.html](http://www.umm.edu/news/humor.html).

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