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GOP vice presidential nominee Dick Cheney and wife, Lynne, laugh with Virginia Scott (right) Sarah Lockhart, and Clark Miller Wednesday.

Unhealthy less likely to find humor

Study: Humor helps heart stay healthy

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New research suggests that the ability to laugh may enable people to avoid the risk of heart disease.

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BALTIMORE — A good laugh may be good for the heart.

A team of Maryland medical researchers found that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in humorous situations than those with healthy hearts.

"The old saying that laughter is the best medicine definitely appears to be true when it comes to protecting your heart," said Michael Miller, director of the Center for Preventative Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

It is uncertain, however, whether humor helps prevent heart problems or if people with heart problems tend to lose their senses of humor.

"That question would be more interesting, but it would also be much harder to answer," said Dr. Rose Marie Robertson, a Vanderbilt University cardiologist and president of the American Heart Association.

The study of 300 people — half of whom had histories of heart problems — used questionnaires to gauge how healthy people and

those with heart disease differed in their responses to situations where humor was expected.

The people with heart disease were much less likely to even recognize humor. They also laughed less, even in positive situations, and generally displayed more anger and hostility than people with healthy hearts.

"The ability to laugh — either naturally or as learned behavior — may have important implications in societies such as the U.S., where heart disease remains the No. 1 killer," Miller said.

Robertson said the Maryland research fits into an area of growing interest among cardiologists: the psychological side of heart disease. Most of that research, however, has examined the effects of mental stress on the human heart or the tendency of heart patients to develop depression after surgery.

Very few studies have pondered the reverse question: whether humor, or a pronounced absence of stress, can reduce a person's risk of heart disease.

Robertson called the Maryland researchers' line of questioning "a very interesting" approach.

"I think what this suggests is that we have to take our patients' psychological states more seriously," she said.

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