

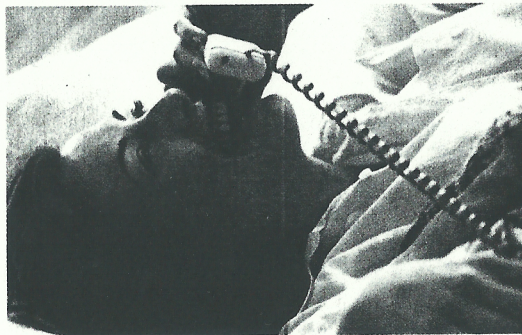
Laugh Your Way To A Healthy Heart

It's no joke

BY LAURA FLYNN MCCARTHY

Watch your favorite comedy and call me in the morning" may sound like a dream prescription for lowering your risk for heart disease, but such advice may someday be doled out by doctors if the results of a preliminary study pan out.

Although several studies have shown that laughter may boost your immune system, doctors at the University of Maryland have done what they believe is the first ever research to link frequent laughing to reducing your risk of heart disease. The doctors gave questionnaires to 300 women and men; half had heart disease, half didn't. The questions probed how the participants would respond in everyday situations that could be



viewed as either annoying or humorous. Example: "If an old friend called you in the middle of the night, just to talk, would you be angry or laugh about it?" The researchers found that people with heart disease laughed at such scenarios 40 percent less often than

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people who were not diagnosed with heart disease.

"This research offers a new clue as to how certain personality traits may affect heart health," says study head Michael Miller, M.D., director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. "We can't tell yet whether heart disease makes people more serious or whether less lighthearted people are more prone to heart trouble." This study provides only an association between laughter and heart disease, but Miller believes it's an important first step.

"Our hypothesis is that laughter causes physiological changes in the body that reduce the risk of heart disease," says Miller. "For example, we know that when people laugh, their blood pressure goes down. Stress hormones, such as cortisol, are also reduced. Excess cortisol can cause platelets to clump together, which can accelerate the heart-attack process, so if you keep cortisol at bay, you can reduce your heart disease risks."

The laugh factor, researchers believe, may be the flip side to the Type A personality. Type A people, who tend to get angry and hostile easily, are more likely to get heart attacks. "It's quite possible that the opposite is also true: People who are able to laugh off everyday annoyances may be less likely to suffer heart attacks," says Miller, who hopes that further study will provide the answer.