

It Feels Good to Laugh

No joke: Laughter is good for you.

By Eric Messinger

At age 11, Jason is a very good student and an accomplished athlete. But one of his favorite talents has nothing to do with either school or sports: He loves to tell jokes.

"If the red house is made out of red bricks, and the blue house is made out of blue bricks, what's the green house made out of?" he asks me.

"Green?" I wonder aloud, sensing that it's probably a wrong answer.

"Glass!" he responds. "Get it? It's a greenhouse, with plants and everything."

Jason is a sixth grader in New York City. He tells all kinds of jokes, from silly ones with stupid punch lines to others that have clever wordplays. "I like to make my friends laugh," he says, "and sometimes I like telling jokes because it makes people feel better, like if someone's a little sad."

Jason may even be a better friend than he realizes. Making people laugh not only improves moods but may also improve health. Several studies have found that laughter has a positive effect. A good laugh boosts the *cardiovascular system*. That's your heart and blood. It also helps the *immune system*, your disease fighters. Laughter may even help you withstand pain.

Health Screenings

News about laughter's influence on the heart and blood system was announced earlier this year by Dr. Michael Miller. He teaches at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. In his study, Miller had people watch two movies. One movie was very serious. The second was very silly. He then measured how much their blood vessels expanded after watching each kind of movie.

That is important information to know. When a blood vessel expands, it's often a sign that certain chemicals are being released into the blood. Those

chemicals help a person maintain a healthy heart. They prevent blood from clotting where it shouldn't and arteries from becoming clogged with *plaque*. That's a sticky substance that can build up on artery walls.

Miller found that when people watched a funny movie, their blood vessels expanded and blood flow increased. How much? As much as it would have if they had gone to the gym for a 15- to 30-minute workout.

"Laughter should not replace exercise, but it certainly should be part of a healthy lifestyle," says Miller. "Everyone should try to get a good laugh in every day."

Laugh to Feel Better

Like a multivitamin, laughter brings a range of health benefits into your daily life. Laughing boosts your immune system. Just look at the work of Dr. Lee Berk, of Loma Linda University in California. He is, by the way, a friend of Hunter "Patch" Adams's. If that name sounds familiar, it's because Adams is a funny doctor who became so famous that a movie was made about him. His interactions with his patients were like comedy routines.

Berk doesn't do bedside standup, but he does research humor. He has shown that laughing can lead to an increase in antibodies and other cells that fight bacteria, viruses, and other body "invaders."

Other studies show that laughter might be helpful for people in hospitals. An organization called Rx Laughter (*Rx* is the medical abbreviation for "prescription") sponsored a study about humor in the hospital. The results suggest that laughter might help children deal with painful medical treatments.

The study involved children between the ages of 8 and 14. The kids placed their hands in cold water for as long as they could while watching funny old TV shows, such as *I Love Lucy*. Guess what happened? The kids were able to withstand pain for a longer period of time when they were watching a funny video than when watching no video. Those who laughed more felt less pain.

"This means that humor can distract you from thinking about a painful procedure but also has the potential to make it seem less painful," says Dr. Margaret Stuber, the main researcher for the study. She works at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Good Humor

As Stuber also points out, an "injection" of humor may even be good for your emotional health. Physical and emotional health are connected. "If you can say to yourself that [a medical treatment] wasn't as bad as you thought it would be, then you're less likely to have nightmares, fears about going to the doctor, and other related anxieties," she says.

No one is saying that laughter can cure a horrible disease. But given how much anxiety health problems can cause, researchers like Stuber are looking closer at laughter. They think laughter can almost always play a helpful role in someone's medical treatment. "Humor ... allows you to take a step back and relax," she says.

You Think You're Funny?

Some people seem funnier than others. But you know what? Most people can improve their sense of humor with a little practice. How? Here are some tips.

- **Look for humor all around you.** Sometimes it is obvious, such as the jokes people tell. Other things are not necessarily intended to be funny but can be if you look at them in a slightly different way. Funny things can include newspaper headlines or something someone says that could be interpreted more than one way.
- **At dinnertime, share the funny things you observed or heard during the day with the rest of your family.**
- **Set up a humor center at home,** such as a bulletin board or the refrigerator, where you can post funny things you want to share.
- **Read a joke book.**
- **If something makes you laugh, think about what would have made it even funnier.**
- **Take photographs or pictures from magazines and make up your own funny captions.**
- **Hang around with people you think are very funny.** Often they're smarter, more social, and more creative than more serious kids.

The tips are from Louis Franzini. He's the author of *Kids Who Laugh: How to Develop Your Child's Sense of Humor*.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, why is it important for blood vessels to expand?

- A expanding helps the vessels to keep growing
- B expanding releases chemicals that help maintain a healthy heart
- C expanding allows the vessels to get enough exercise
- D expanding helps the immune system

2. What effect did funny movies have on blood vessels?

- A It made the vessels laugh.
- B It made the blood vessels expand.
- C It created more antibodies.
- D It caused more anxiety.

3. Based on the passage, why is laughter like a multivitamin?

- A Laughter helps build a healthy immune system like a multivitamin.
- B Laughter helps build a healthy heart like a multivitamin.
- C Laughter clogs arteries with plaque like a multivitamin.
- D Laughter helps people remember their pain.

4. Read the following sentence and answer the question below: "At age 11, Jason is a very good student and an accomplished athlete."

As used in this sentence, **accomplished** means

- A cares about other people
- B very funny
- C very good at something
- D healthy and strong

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A why doctors are good comedians
- B how to tell a good joke
- C why some people are funnier than others
- D why laughter is good for health

6. Laughter has a positive effect on which to human systems?

7. How could laughter possibly help prevent a cold?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Laughter can increase blood flow like a workout, _____ it should not replace exercise.

- A although
- B because
- C so
- D after

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Laughter helps patients relax in the hospital when they are sick.

What? laughter

(does) What? _____

When? _____

Where? _____

10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: withstand (with · stand): able to survive something challenging.

10a. Read the sentences below and underline the word **withstand**.

1. Laughter can help cancer patients withstand the painful treatments they need to go through.
2. The flowers were unable to withstand the freezing cold temperatures, and died after the spring snowstorm.
3. The old tree could not withstand the strong wind of the hurricane so it fell down.
4. How long can you withstand the pain of the cold before pulling your hand out of the icy water?
5. Many sports require players to withstand pain in order to win.

10b. Which image shows weather that you would have to withstand?



11. Which of the following would be harder to withstand: washing your hands in boiling hot water or washing your hands in room temperature water? Why?

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 860

Featured Text Structure: Cause/Effect – the writer presents the reason an event happened and its results

Passage Summary: This passage discusses the effect of humor on physical and emotional health. Humor is now being used in medical treatment to help patients who are in pain. The passage also offers ideas of how to improve a sense of humor.

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- A why doctors are good comedians
- B how to tell a good joke
- C why some people are funnier than others
- D why laughter is good for health**

6. Laughter has a positive effect on which human systems?

Suggested answer: Laughter has a positive effect on the cardiovascular and immune systems in the body. [paragraph #6]

7. How could laughter possibly help prevent a cold?

Suggested answer: Because it helps the immune system by increasing antibodies, which can fight bacteria, viruses, and other body invaders. [paragraph #12]

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

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- C so**
- D after**

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Laughter helps patients relax in the hospital when they are sick.

What? laughter

(does) What? **helps patients relax**

When? **when they are sick**

Where? **in the hospital**

10. ReadWorks recommends that you teach this vocabulary word to the whole class out loud using the four steps listed below.

Vocabulary Word: withstand

Step 1: Introduce the word

- a. Teacher writes the word on the board and divides it into syllables: (with · stand)
- b. Teacher says: "This word is withstand. What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "Withstand."]

Step 2: Provide a child-friendly definition

- a. Teacher says: "Withstand means that you are able to survive something challenging."
- b. Teacher says: "In this passage, patients are able to withstand painful treatments with humor and laughter. Many athletes are able to withstand pain to run for a long time, or to lift very heavy objects."
- c. Teacher says: "What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "Withstand."]

Step 3: Practice the word

Teacher provides examples and additional opportunities to repeat the word. Read the 1st sentence out loud to your students. Begin reading it again and when you come to the vocabulary word prompt students to say the vocabulary word out loud. Then, finish reading the sentence out loud to your students.

- 10a.**
1. Laughter can help cancer patients withstand the painful treatments they need to go through.
 2. The flowers were unable to withstand the freezing cold temperatures, and died after the spring snowstorm.
 3. The old tree could not withstand the strong wind of the hurricane so it fell down.
 4. How long can you withstand the pain of the cold before pulling your hand out of the icy water?
 5. Many sports require players to withstand pain in order to win.

Step 4: Check for student understanding

This step can be completed as a whole class activity or as an independent practice.

- 10b.** Which image shows weather that you would have to withstand?



- 11.** Which of the following would be harder to withstand: washing your hands in boiling hot water or washing your hands in room temperature water? Why?

Suggested answer: It would be harder to withstand washing your hands in boiling water, because it is painful and you would not be able to do it for very long.

Suggested Additional Vocabulary: accomplished, immune, humor