

HEALTH **HAPPINESS**

# HAPPY *daze*

By Celia Shatzman for USA TODAY

*i*f you're happy and you know it, then you're doing good for your body. Though it seems like we're all familiar with the keys to living a healthy lifestyle—exercising most days of the week, eating lots of veggies, getting plenty of sleep, and quitting smoking—there's another one to add to the list: happiness. Being joyful is a fun prescription for a long life. Here are four reasons to look on the bright side. >>



# HEALTH HAPPINESS

## 1/ For the heart of it

> Having a positive outlook can ward off heart disease, according to a study in the *European Heart Journal*, and focusing on happy emotions can decrease heart health risks. Karina Davidson and her research team at Columbia University Medical Center followed 1,739 men and women over 10 years and discovered that those who were enthusiastic were less likely to develop heart disease than melancholy folks. Each study participant's heart disease risk was measured along with positive emotions like happiness, excitement, and enthusiasm and negative emotions like hostility, anxiety, and depression. Researchers graded the positive emotions on a five-level scale and learned that with each rank added, the risk of heart disease decreased by 22 percent. And even if people were experiencing sadness at the time of the survey, as long as they were generally happy it didn't affect their cardiovascular well-being. Though researchers can't pinpoint the exact reason for the correlation, a strong possibility is that people who are happier typically are able to rest and relax more, and they may recuperate faster from stressful events.

## 2/ Positive psychology

> If you're of the glass-half-full mentality, you're less likely to catch a cold, says a study published in *Psychological Science*. Researchers at the University of Kentucky in Lexington discovered that looking on the bright side can boost your immune system. The study followed first-year law students and measured their optimism and cell-mediated immunity (CMI) levels, which are



crucial in warding off viral infections. Levels were checked five times over the school year through a survey and skin test. The results proved that when students were more optimistic, their CMI

levels got a boost, while pessimism led them to decline. So next time you feel the sniffles coming on, think positive!

## 3/ Happy times

> Here's a shocker: Being happy is just as crucial to your health as not smoking. Joyful folks tend to live longer—a longevity boost similar to the life span of smokers versus non-smokers—since they're less likely to get sick, according to a study published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Being cheerful doesn't lengthen the life of seriously ill people, but it does promote longevity among healthy folks. Though the researchers at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands can't explain the phenomenon for certain, one of the reasons may be that happy people are more likely to lead a healthy lifestyle. Also, chronic unhappiness causes stress, weakening the immune system.

## 4/ Less stress

> Another reason to smile: Happy people experience less stress than their worried counterparts, according to a study in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Researchers followed British civil servants who were all in good health and measured their blood pressure and heart rate throughout the day, asking them to rank how happy, stressed, or tired they were at each assessment. The results: People who had the lowest levels of psychological distress were generally happier and had lower cortisol levels, confirming the link between stress and happiness. On average, cortisol levels were 32 percent higher among the unhappiest people. Elevated cortisol levels are associated with a higher risk of developing high blood pressure, diabetes, abdominal obesity, autoimmune deficiencies, and stress-related illnesses.



WHAT'S THE  
HAPPIEST CITY  
IN AMERICA?  
TURN THE PAGE!

## CHEER UP!

Looking for ways to stay positive—and healthy? Check out these tips, culled from the latest research:

> **Scrub a tub.** Next time you're looking for a jolt of motivation to do some cleaning, remember that doing brisk housework for 20 minutes a week reduces your risk of depression and other emotional ills, according to a study published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

> **Hit the gym.** It's no secret that working out provides an instant mood boost, but it lasts much longer than scientists originally thought. Research from the University of Vermont in Burlington discovered that people who biked for 20 minutes reaped the benefits for as long as 12 hours afterward! Experts say that any activity for just a few minutes a day can bolster your spirits. The trick is picking something you like.

> **Enjoy the great outdoors.** Spending 30 minutes outside when the sun is shining will improve your mood and your brain's ability to absorb new information, says a study from the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics. Try squeezing in a quick nature walk on your lunch break to achieve that double boost.

> **Take a stand.** Put some pep in your step by doing an act of activism. A study in *Political Psychology* says even signing a petition can help you feel more alive, alert, competent, and motivated.

> **Just smile.** Several studies have proven that grinning is an automatic pick-me-up. And research says the more you smile, the more people will smile back at you, spreading joy everywhere.

> **Hang out with happy friends.** Being gleeful is contagious, according to research from Harvard University and UC San Diego. Happiness spreads through social networks of family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, and knowing a happy person makes you 15.3 percent more likely to be cheery yourself. The study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, showed that a happy friend of a friend increases your odds of happiness by 9.8 percent. The more sunny people you surround yourself with, the happier you'll be!