Rx for a Healthy Heart - Have a Good Laugh

We all know that exercise is good for us – good for our bodies, good for our minds and, especially, good for our hearts. But did you know that laughter can be just as important to your heart health? Norman Cousins, author of *The Healing Heart,* has called laughter "inner jogging". And now the scientists are agreeing with him.

In a study presented at the American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions, patients who laughed more had a significantly reduced risk of heart and artery disease. Michael Miller, M.D., director of the center for preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, led a research team that compared 150 patients, who had either heart attacks or vascular surgery, with 150 people with healthy hearts. And, according to Dr. Miller, "the old axiom that "laughter is the best medicine" appears to hold true when it comes to protecting your heart."

Participants in the study were asked to rate how much – or how little –they would laugh in various common situations, from discovering someone at a party was wearing identical clothing to just socializing with friends. People who had the highest humor scores also had healthier hearts.

We now know a lot about what contributes to heart disease – like high cholesterol or smoking – but we need to know more about what prevents it. This study was the first to actually document that laughter may influence heart and artery disease. Numerous studies have linked anger and hostility to coronary artery disease. In fact, stress may "cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol buildup in the coronary arteries," says Dr. Miller. On the other hand, laughter might actually release protective chemicals that defend against it.

More work needs to be done to discover exactly how humor influences heart health. But, meanwhile, the recommendation is for doctors and patients to take humor more seriously. Or is it less seriously? Well, anyway, did you hear the one about…?