Laugh it off

We all know we feel better after a good laugh. Scientists are now taking a more serious look at laughter as medicine.

In 1979 Norman Cousins wrote a memoir called “Anatomy of an Illness.” He had experienced a painful spinal disease that he claims he helped cure by watching Marx Brothers movies and “Candid Camera” and seeking out laughter. He claimed that 10 to 15 minutes of laughter would allow him two hours of pain-free sleep.

Laughter can help the pituitary gland release pain-suppressing opiates like endorphins. A new field of study called geletology — from the Greek gelos, meaning laughter — studies laughter and its effects on the body from a psychological and physiological perspective. What we knew innately is now being documented.

The following is an impressive list of the benefits of laughter:

Laughter can increase oxygen uptake and blood flow. It can reduce stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, and it can improve memory, learning, alertness and creativity. Dr. William Fry of Stanford University says “humor and creativity work in similar ways, and by creating relationships between two disconnected items, you engage the whole brain.”

Studies at the University of Maryland suggest that humor may raise the level of infection-fighting antibodies and boost the levels of immune cells. Nineteen diabetics in another University of Maryland study were found to have lower blood sugar levels after watching a comedy than after attending a dry lecture, or even after eating the same meal.
I went to the Mayo Clinic website to see what they had to say about laughter and much of what I found there corroborates the information I found in other studies:

A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body. The website says laughter can:

- Stimulate many organs. Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.

- Activate and relieve your stress response. A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure. The result is good, relaxed feeling.

- Soothe tension. Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

In the long term, laughter can:

- Improve your immune system. Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.

- Relieve pain. Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers. Laughter may also break the pain-spasm cycle common to some muscle disorders.

- Increase personal satisfaction. Laughter can also make it easier to cope with difficult situations. It also helps you connect with other people.

- Improve your mood. Many people experience depression, sometimes due to chronic illnesses. Laughter can help lessen your depression and anxiety and make you feel happier.

Cancer Treatment Centers of America is starting to adopt laughter therapy as a tool to help cancer patients. Dr. Katherine Puckett introduced laughter therapy to the Midwestern Regional Medical Center when a patient asked for it. Now laughter clubs or humor groups are led at CTCA to help patients and families heal. Laughter therapy is based on the physical exercise of laughing, so patients start by just making “ha-ha” or “he-he” sounds until they start laughing. Puckett says that it is hard for people not to join in because laughter is so contagious. One of the things she is finding is that patients learn to laugh. Their situation is not very funny but they can still laugh and feel better. When you laugh, it’s hard to concentrate on anything negative.
Start with a smile. Play. Look for the funny things in life. Try to find a giggle even when you feel like crying. It just might help you feel better.

Marsha Munsell is a health, home and family development program assistant for the Cooperative Extension Service, a part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Contact her at 907-474-5414 or mkmunsell@alaska.edu.