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## Heart Disease Health Center

### Study: Happiness Good for the Heart

#### Positive People Have Less Heart Disease

By [Salynn Boyles](#)

WebMD Health News

Reviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#)

Feb. 17, 2010 - Whether you view the glass as half empty or half full may help determine your risk for [heart disease](#).

Just as negative emotions such as [depression](#), anger, and hostility are risk factors for [heart attack](#) and [stroke](#), happiness seems to protect the [heart](#).

This was the finding from a large study that examined the impact of positive personality traits like happiness, contentment, and enthusiasm on heart disease risk.

Researchers followed 1,739 healthy adults living in Nova Scotia, Canada, for 10 years to determine whether attitudes affected their health.

At the start of the study, trained professionals assessed the participants' degree of expression of negative emotions like depression, hostility, and [anxiety](#) and positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and excitement.

Naturally happy people certainly do experience depression and other negative emotions from time to time, lead researcher Karina W. Davidson, PhD, of Columbia University Medical Center tells WebMD. But this is usually situational and transient.

The tendency toward expression of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment is known in psychological circles as "positive affect."

"We know from previous studies that negative emotion is predictive of heart disease," Davidson says. "We wanted to find out if positive affect is protective."

#### Happiness and the Heart

After accounting for known heart disease risk factors, the researchers found that the happiest people were 22% less likely to develop heart disease over the 10 years of follow-up than people who fell in the middle of the negative-positive emotion scale.

People with the most negative emotions had the highest risk for heart disease and people who scored highest for happiness had the lowest risk.

This observed protection persisted even when naturally happy people were experiencing transient depressive symptoms.

The findings do not prove that happiness protects the heart. For that, Davidson says, rigorously designed clinical trials will be needed.

"It is just speculation at this point, but there are several possible explanations for how happiness may protect the heart," Davidson says.

They include:

**Healthier lifestyle:** Happy people tend to [sleep](#) better, eat better, smoke less, and get more [exercise](#). All of these things lower heart disease risk.

**Physiological impact:** Happiness may produce a host of positive chemical changes -- such a reduction in [stress](#) hormones -- that are good for the heart.

**Genetic influences:** It could be that people who are predisposed to happiness are also predisposed to have fewer heart attacks.

"If we are able to change people's level of positive affect we may be able to lower their risk for heart disease," Davidson says.

She recommends devoting at least 15 to 20 minutes a day to doing something enjoyable and relaxing. And make sure this

activity is not the first thing to be abandoned on a busy day.

"You have to commit to it," she says. "Schedule the time and stick to it."

### Don't Worry, Be Happy

Research into happiness and how it impacts health, known as positive [psychology](#), is a relatively new.

It was long believed that most people are hardwired to be either naturally happy or not, regardless of life events.

But this view has changed in recent years as more becomes known about the science of happiness, University of Michigan professor of medicine Bertram Pitt, MD, tells WebMD.

In an editorial published with the study, Pitt writes that interventions that focus on improving social skills and decreasing [social anxiety](#) may lower heart disease risk.

Both the study and editorial appear in the *European Heart Journal*.

Pitt cites numerous strategies that could help naturally negative people become happier, including:

- Express gratitude on a regular basis.
- Practice being optimistic.
- Engage in frequent acts of kindness.
- Visualize one's best self.
- Savor joyful events.
- Practice forgiveness.

"Finally, regular exercise and sexual activity and good sleep are all associated with increased self-reported happiness," he writes.

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