The Health Benefits of Love

How Love Can Improve Your Health

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We've all heard about the studies suggesting happily married people live longer, but can love alone really have that much of an impact on your health? According to recent research, it can and it's not just being married or getting regular exercise from love-making that will keep you healthy. You may be surprised by exactly how love can affect your health and just how simple it is to get the benefits. Here are some of proven health benefits of love and how you can get in on them.

Better heart health

In one study, researchers talked with nearly 10 thousand married men who had no previous history of angina (chest pains). Despite high risk factors like high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes, men who felt loved by their wives experienced half the angina as men who felt their wives did show them love.

Lower cholesterol levels

Just putting your affectionate feelings down on paper can lower your cholesterol level. Increased youth hormones

Levels of the "anti-aging" hormone DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone), which produces feelings of youth and vitality, are also affected by feelings of love. Interestingly, showing support and affection for loved ones seems to slow the aging process even more than receiving love does.

Pain relief and a stronger immune system

It's not just romantic love that can improve your health. Just showing your care and concern for others in your community can also provide health benefits. Research has shown that just helping out in the community offered relief from pain related to stress-sensitive conditions like multiple sclerosis, and headaches, and lupus. Researchers suggested effects were due to relaxation and endorphin release.

Other studies have shown that acts of selfless love can increase immunity by decreasing stress. When under stress, the body releases the hormone cortisol, which can suppress the immune system.

Healthy hugging

Hugging has measurable benefits for the heart. Researchers asked 38 couples to sit close to one another, talk, and then hug. Afterwards, women showed somewhat lower levels of cortisol and lower blood pressure, while both men and women had increased levels of oxytocin, the bonding hormone. For women, the effect is similar to what they would get from a typical blood pressure medication. Although men don't get the same blood pressure reduction from hugging, it's believed they get similar benefits from regular sex.

Making love

It's more than just exercise. There are numerous health benefits to love-making. Many are the same as non-physical expressions of love, but stronger. For instance, simply being in love increases your DHEA levels, but as one researcher interviewed for the article stated, "Just before orgasm and ejaculation, DHEA spikes to levels three to five times higher than usual."

But there are some benefits to love-making that non-physical affection doesn't supply. Another study concluded that, over a ten-year period, men who had sex at least twice a week were half as likely to die as men who had sex less than once a month. This applied to the young as well as the elderly. Regular intercourse also promotes prostate health by reducing the likelihood of fluid build-up in the organ. For women, love-making increases estrogen levels, which helps keep the heart healthy. Both partners benefit from emotional intimacy during sex, which eases stress and fosters an overall sense of well-being.

It's not just the inside that benefits; making love can help keep you looking good, too. Couples with a healthy sex life can look up to seven years younger than those who aren't as intimate possibly because sex reduces external signs of aging caused by stress.

But promiscuity's not the answer. Health-promoting sex can't be separated from deep emotional connection. A good sex life stems from a good relationship.

A loving marriage

There are hundreds of studies out there on the effects of a happy marriage on physical health and while there are some contradictions, most indicate being in a loving, supportive marriage has significant health benefits. Studies have found that the death rate was "significantly higher" for unmarried people than for married people living with their spouse. The effect was most dramatic in the never-married.

This may be in part because happily married people are less likely to indulge in risky behaviors out of concern for their spouse. Studies show that married people are significantly less likely to smoke or drink heavily, married women are 20 percent less likely than single women die of stress-related causes like heart disease, suicide and cirrhosis of the liver, while married men are 100 to 200 percent times less likely to die of these causes than single men are. What's more, statistics have also shown married people are less likely to be victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and other violent crimes.

Considering what a powerful emotion love is, maybe it shouldn't be surprising that it can protect your heart, up your levels of youthful hormones, and even lower your cholesterol. Love may have its ups and downs, but overall, at least from a medical perspective, it's worth it. ■