

Watching funny shows helps children tolerate pain longer, study finds

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Watching comedy shows helps children tolerate pain for longer periods of time, according to a study by UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center and the nonprofit organization Rx Laughter.

The study findings, published in the October issue of the journal *Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, suggest that humorous distraction could be used in clinical settings to help children and adolescents better handle painful procedures.

Laughter has long been viewed as good medicine, and although there are many programs that bring humor into pediatric hospitals, little research has been done on the utility of humor for children or adolescents undergoing stressful or painful procedures, such as blood draws and treatments for cancer.

Rx Laughter, an organization founded by former television executive Sherry Dunay Hilber that promotes the use of humor in healing, worked with UCLA researchers on the study, which was funded by a grant from Comedy Central. Participants watched funny classic and contemporary films and television programs while undergoing a standardized pain task — in this case, placing their hands in icy-cold water, said Dr. Margaret Stuber, a researcher at UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center and first author of the study.

The group demonstrated "significantly greater pain tolerance" while viewing the funny shows, according to the study.

Stuber said that researchers documented submersion times and participants' appraisal of the pain and examined them in relation to humor indicators — the number of times the children laughed or smiled and their ratings of how funny the show was for them.

"We found that viewing funny videos increased the tolerance of pain for children but did not change their ratings of the severity of the pain," said Stuber, UCLA's Jane and Marc Nathanson Professor of Psychiatry at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. "Although they kept their hands in the water longer, they didn't describe the task as any less painful than when they weren't watching the videos. However, this may mean that it simply took longer for the pain to become severe enough to remove their hand."

The number of laughs recorded was not related to either pain tolerance or appraisal, Stuber said.

Eighteen healthy children — 12 boys and six girls between the ages of 7 and 16, with a mean age of 12 — participated in the study. An ice chest was fitted with a plastic mesh screen to separate crushed ice from a plastic mesh armrest placed in 50-degree water. Water was circulated through the ice by a pump to prevent local warming. Participants placed a hand in the cold water to a depth of two inches above the wrist for up to three minutes maximum. Their hands were warmed between tests with warm towels.

Researchers took a baseline measure of submersion duration before the video was viewed, a measurement after and one while participants watched the video. The children left their hands in the icy water significantly longer when watching the funny shows, Stuber said.

Further study is needed to explore the specific mechanism behind the increased pain tolerance, Stuber said.

"Since we did not test any other types of distracters, it could be that something equally distracting but not funny would also be effective," she said. "However, the results do support the types of interventions being done at children's hospitals across the United States."

Source: UCLA

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