

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

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## The Health Benefits of Gratitude

*Thanksgiving is a time to be especially grateful for all of life's many blessings. We encourage children to make lists of things they appreciate, and we celebrate Thanksgiving Day as an expression of gratitude. It's truly the time of year to give thanks.*

*Yet your doctor at Duluth MultiCare encourages you to make expressing gratitude a part of daily living throughout the year — not just a Thanksgiving tradition. Why? Research shows that gratitude has an immense positive effect on physical and mental health.*



### Preventive Care

Your doctor at Duluth MultiCare strongly advocates the **chiropractic lifestyle** — a way of life that's rooted in disease prevention through healthy life choices and chiropractic care. One of the components of this mode of living includes embracing positive thinking to support physical health.

It's obvious that reducing emotions like stress, frustration and anger improves mental and physical well-being. Now research also shows that expressing gratitude and appreciation has a direct positive effect on sleep, well-being, depression and disease.

### Boost Well-Being

Your doctor at Duluth MultiCare encourages patients to express gratitude toward their friends and family because research shows that doing so

profoundly affects emotional and physical well-being.

In a recent 21-day study, researchers examined the effect of a grateful outlook on psychological and physical function. The researchers divided the test subjects into three groups and asked them to keep weekly journals. They asked participants in the first group to record hassles; individuals in the second created grateful lists; and the third cohort recorded neutral events.

Individuals who kept gratitude journals exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic about the upcoming week, compared with the other two groups. Those practicing gratitude were also more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals, such as academic, in-



terpersonal and health, over a two-month period compared with subjects in the other groups.

The researchers concluded that "a conscious focus on blessings may have emotional and interpersonal benefits." (*J Pers Soc Psychol* 2003;84:377-89.)

### Improved Sleep

Have trouble sleeping? Expressing gratitude may help you stop counting sheep and get some zzz's.

As a subset study of the 21-day journal research experiment, researchers assigned patients with neuromuscular disease the same three journal conditions: hassles, gratitude or neutral events. Subjects in the gratitude group were more apt to enjoy improved sleep quality and sleep duration than the other two groups.

Those in the gratitude group were also more apt to report increased emotional well-being, such as higher-energy positive moods, a greater sense of connectedness to others and more optimistic view of life, compared with the other groups (*J Pers Soc Psychol* 2003;84:377-89).

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## Manage Crises Better

Ask people what it takes to survive a crisis, and they'll probably list courage, perseverance and determination. However, research shows that softer emotions, such as gratitude and caring, are fundamental in overcoming tragedy.

In a university-based study, researchers assessed personality traits of 46 students early in 2001 and in the weeks following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. Individuals with positive emotions, mainly gratitude and love, were less likely to suffer depressive symptoms and more likely to cope and experience a growth in psychological resources, than those who lacked empathetic characteristics.

"Findings suggest that positive emotions in the aftermath of crises buffer resilient people against depression and fuel thriving," conclude the researchers (*J Pers Soc Psychol* 2003;84:365).

## Combat Stress and Depression

Those who express gratitude regularly are more apt to feel happier, relaxed and energetic, emotions that are linked to reducing stress and depression. Researchers hypothesize that expressing appreciation or gratitude decreases levels of the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine.

## Prevent Heart Disease

Hearts that are full of gratitude are most likely to be healthy. Why? Evidence suggests that positive emotions from gratitude to optimism protect against coronary artery disease (CAD).

While conversely, research shows that negative emotional states and stress can cause a "chronic stress response" in the body. This "hyperarousal" response may cause changes in heart rate and blood pressure and delayed recovery to stressful stimuli, increasing risks for CAD (*Psychosom Med* 2005;67:S47-53).

## How to Give Thanks

Let's face it: Expressing gratitude and appreciation isn't always easy. It may be especially difficult when events or people fall short of our expectations.

Don't despair. Becoming a gratitude guru is easier than you think. Here is a list of suggestions to help bring gratitude into your daily living.

- Keep a journal or gratitude list.
- Find five things a day that you're grateful for and write them down.
- Place the list or journal in a place that's frequently accessed, such as posted to the refrigerator, in a wallet or affixed to a computer monitor.
- Start off slowly. It's better to record a few true expressions of gratitude than false improvisations. At first, quality may be more important than quantity.
- Share your daily gratitude list with family members during dinner. This not only promotes keeping your list, but also spending quality time together as a family.
- Make a point to share with at least

one person each day a sentence beginning, "I'm so grateful for your ..."

- Catch a co-worker or child "doing something right" and make a point to tell him or her.
- Send a thank-you note or e-card to a friend or family member, even if there is no specific reason other than thanking him or her for being a part of your life.
- Volunteer your time, such as at a food pantry or a local park clean-up. Consider how much you have to be thankful for as you donate your time.
- Put yourself in others' shoes before judging. Appreciate their contributions and perspectives even if they're different from yours.

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