

Mens Health



The health perks of fatherhood

Ask any new dad how fatherhood has affected his health, and he's likely be too tired to give you an answer. Between the stress and the lack of sleep, the art of parenting can make some men feel like their heads are spinning.

Social-media consultant Aaron Weintraub, 31, knows this all too well. He and his wife have a 10-year-old daughter and a 1½-year-old son. He works from home and serves as the primary caretaker for his toddler. The last several years have changed his life in drastic ways.

“Fatherhood releases a flood of sometimes contradictory instincts around health and well-being,” Weintraub says. “In my experience, the nesting instinct quickly gives way to the realization of impermanence, which eventually melds into self-preservation. For example, ‘I am going to grow a garden and eat all organic local produce’ becomes ‘The garden has died because I didn’t water it,’ which becomes ‘Oh well, Sam’s Club vegetables are still vegetables.’

Weintraub meets fatherhood’s challenges by living at a breakneck pace. “I keep the sort of schedule that only a crazy person — or a work-at-home dad — keeps,” he says. “I get up every morning at 4 a.m., I’m at the gym when it opens at 4:30, I get home to get my daughter up for school by 6, and then I work until I get my wife and son up at 8. Then I scratch out time for meetings and work tasks during the ever more scarce nap times. If anything, fatherhood has given me a healthy respect for the balancing act of good health.”

According to the latest research about men’s health, there’s good news for Weintraub and other dads: The responsibilities of fatherhood bring along with them health benefits that can lead to a longer, happier life.

1. Dads are less vulnerable to heart problems.

Men who do not have kids may more likely than men who do have kids to die of a heart-related illness, according to a recent study in the journal *Human Reproduction*. Researchers tracked the health of almost 138,000 men ages 50 to 71 over the course of 10 years, and found that fathers were 17 percent less likely to die of cardiovascular disease than their childless peers.

Chet Johnson, MD, a father and professor of pediatrics at the University of Kansas, says it’s easy to see why kids might be beneficial for a man’s

heart. “There is a positive relationship between fatherhood and health status that is mediated by lifestyle risks such as obesity, smoking, and how competent you are in the father role,” he says. “In other words, you can't just father a bunch of kids and be healthier, but fathers engaged in being a dad and husband are healthier.”

2. Dads don't drink or smoke as much.

When it comes to at-risk behaviors like drinking, smoking, and drug use, fatherhood just might be enough to straighten some men out, say researchers from Oregon State University. According to their study of more than 200 men, those with kids showed consistent decreases in tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use. They were also less likely to commit crimes.

“The pressure to be a risk-taker can lead many men to put their health in jeopardy,” explains Michael Addis, PhD, professor of psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. When a child arrives, it can be just what a man needs to put away his “bad boy” side and begin working on his parenting skills.

3. Dads have lower testosterone levels.

Though men have been conditioned to see low testosterone as a bad thing, testosterone that is lower but still in a healthy range might make you a better, more nurturing dad and husband. Fatherhood might just lead to that drop in testosterone, according to a recent study from the Philippines. Researchers studied more than 600 men and found that not only did fathers have lower testosterone than their single or mating counterparts, but the more the man was involved in child care, the lower his testosterone was.

“It's good because your children and family are probably going to thrive if you're focused on them and not responding to a higher testosterone drive to find a new mate,” Dr. Johnson says. “With higher testosterone levels, younger men want to mate to provide the next generation. The lower levels resulting from relationship bonds are, in turn, good for family.”

4. Involved fathers are less likely to be depressed.

While fatherhood alone is unlikely to ward off depression, men who really throw themselves into their parenting roles seem to have fewer depressive symptoms than other men, according to a study published in the Journal of Family Issues. Researchers looked at more than 550 families and found that good relationship quality between parents led to lower levels of depression in fathers, even when fathers didn't live in the same home as their children.

5. Fathers may make better choices about nutrition.

Johnson has seen fatherhood have a positive impact on the diets of many men. "Parenting means thinking about children's nutrition, and fathers often want to model good eating habits, so their diets improve," he says.

Certainly the food choices a father makes will influence the food choices a kid makes. A study of 312 families at Texas A&M University made this pretty clear, as fathers who ate more fast food had kids who ate more fast food.

Fatherhood forever changes your life. On many days, you may feel very out of control. But know that in addition to the joys of watching your child grow up, all the love and attention you're investing are good for your health and well-being, too.