Avoiding lies can improve your health, research suggests
By Sharon Jayson and Gannett news service
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Honesty may boost your health, suggests a study that found telling fewer lies benefits people physically and mentally.

Each week for 10 weeks, 110 individuals, ages 18-71, took a lie-detector test and completed health and relationship measures assessing the number of major and minor lies they told that week, said lead author Anita Kelly, a psychology professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. She presented findings at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, which ended Sunday.

“When they went up in their lies, their health went down,” says Kelly. “When their lies went down, their health improved.”

Researchers instructed half the participants to refrain from telling any lies for any reason to anyone. The other half got no such instructions.

The link between less lying and improved health was significantly stronger for participants in the no-lie group. When they told three fewer minor lies than in other weeks, for example, they experienced, an average of four fewer mental health complaints, such as feeling tense or melancholy, and three fewer physical complaints, such as sore throats or headaches.

Linda Stroh, a professor emeritus of organizational behavior at Loyola University in Chicago, said findings are consistent with her research on trust.

“When you find that you don’t lie, you have less stress,” she said. “Being very conflicted adds an inordinate amount of stress to your life.”

Past research suggests that Americans average 11 lies a week. Kelly said the no-lie group was down to one lie, on average, a week. For both groups, when participants lied less in a given week, they reported their physical and mental health to be significantly better that week.

“It’s certainly a worthy goal to have people be more genuine and interact with others in a more honest way,” said psychologist Robert Feldman of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. “That would be ultimately beneficial. I’m a little skeptical that it makes us all healthier, but it may make us healthier in a psychological way.”