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Can meditation help your heart?

People who practice this mind-calming technique may be less likely to have risk factors linked to heart disease.

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Millions of Americans are using modern technology — via apps on their smartphones — to practice meditation, an ancient tradition that helps promote a sense of calm and relaxation. Last year's deluge of stress-inducing news was a boon for the meditation app business, which has evolved into a billion-dollar industry.

Growing evidence suggests that meditation may also improve factors linked to cardiovascular health. The latest comes from a Sept. 15, 2020, article in the *American Journal of Cardiology*. Researchers studied more than 61,000 people who took part in the two most recent National Health Interview Surveys (done in 2012 and 2017). Nearly 10% of the participants said they practiced some form of meditation. After adjusting for age, sex, sleep, depression, and other possible confounding factors, researchers found people who meditated had a lower prevalence of high cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and coronary artery disease compared with people who didn't meditate.



Breathe and relax

As the study authors note, there are many forms of meditation (see "Meditation: Cultivating attention and awareness"), and it's not clear whether certain types offer specific advantages. But the heart-related benefits likely stem from a common underlying mechanism, says Dr. Darshan Mehta, medical director of the Benson-Henry Institute (BHI) for Mind Body Medicine at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.

"Many forms of meditation slow down your breathing, which leads to the downstream physiological effects, such as lowered blood pressure," he says. In fact, meditation allows one to evoke the relaxation response, which refers to the physiologic changes that are the opposite of the body's "fight or flight" stress response.

First described by Dr. Herbert Benson (founder and director emeritus of the BHI), the relaxation response slows down your heart and breathing and reduces your oxygen consumption. Other meditative techniques such as guided imagery, tai chi, yoga, prayer, or even knitting can also induce those changes.

Dr. Benson's initial studies of the phenomenon were done on Transcendental Meditation practitioners in the late 1960s. "But he later recognized that the relaxation response changes weren't unique to that type of meditation. There is an evolved human experience present in all cultures that counteracts the negative effects of the stress response," says Dr. Mehta.

Meditation: Cultivating attention and awareness

Most major religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, feature meditative practices. But many people who meditate do it independently of any religious or spiritual beliefs.

Some experts think of meditative practices in two broad categories: focused attention and open monitoring. With focused attention, you concentrate on one thing: counting, a mantra (a word or phrase), or an object (a candle, tree, or prayer beads, for example). With open monitoring, you open your awareness to everything that you're experiencing, including thoughts and feelings but also sounds, smells, and bodily sensations.

Transcendental Meditation (which the Beatles helped popularize in the 1960s) uses mantras. Mindfulness meditation practices (all the rage in recent decades) incorporate both attention and awareness. Other forms of meditation include samatha (calming and concentration) meditation, vipassana (insight) meditation, and metta (loving-kindness) meditation.

Better blood pressure

Perhaps the best evidence for meditation's role in heart health has to do with its ability to lower blood pressure, although the effects vary quite a bit from study to study, says Dr. Mehta. Still, a BHI-led study from 2018 suggests a mechanism: in some people, regularly evoking the relaxation response appears to turn on genes involved in dilating the blood vessels and turn off genes associated with inflammation and blood vessel constriction.


Regular meditation also may help raise heart rate variability, according to one small study. Finally, it's possible (though not proven) that meditation may encourage other behaviors that foster heart health, such as sleeping more soundly and feeling less stressed. High stress levels can lead some people to develop unhealthy habits, such as eating too much junk food and drinking too much alcohol, notes Dr. Mehta.

Getting started with meditation

Using a meditation app can be a convenient way to learn the practice. Some people find that practicing with a group helps, although the COVID-19 pandemic has made that option impractical. You can also try one of the free guided meditations from the BHI (online at <https://bensohenryinstitute.org/guided-relaxation-exercises/>).

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