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Meditation as medicine

Studies highlight relaxation technique as effective treatment for range of ailments afflicting heart, blood

By Jamie Talan, Newsday Staff Writer

The age-old relaxation method of Transcendental Meditation may have a place in the doctor's office. A new study by California scientists found that meditation kept blood pressure and blood glucose levels lower in heart patients who meditated over a four-month period.

"These were the same kinds of changes we would see with a medication," said Dr. Noel Bairey Merz, medical director of the Preventive Cardiac Center at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. More than a decade ago, Merz and her colleagues were among the first to describe the adverse effects of stress on the heart. Since then, they have been studying ways to reduce stress.

Several years ago, they decided to study Transcendental Meditation because it is a time-tested relaxation technique that is taught by certified TM instructors. This makes it easier to study, which helps lessen variability among patient meditators. They recruited 103 patients with established coronary heart disease and randomly assigned them to the Transcendental Meditation treatment or to an equal amount of time receiving tutoring in health education.

Throughout the study, they measured blood pressure, blood glucose, insulin resistance and heart-rate variability. The researchers found that those trained to meditate had lower blood pressure and healthier levels of insulin and blood glucose than those who received advice from a health educator. The study appears this week in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

Although others have shown benefits of meditation on the heart, this is the first study to show that it may also work on protecting the factors key to insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. "This was a surprise," Merz said. "It suggests that there are mechanisms that regulate blood glucose and insulin that we need to understand better."

The researchers collaborated with Dr. Robert Schneider of the Institute for Natural Medicine and Prevention at the Maharishi University of Management in Iowa. The scientist studies the medical benefits of this specialized meditation and provided the California researchers with certified Transcendental Meditation teachers to train their patients.

“This is a very promising study,” said Dr. Gary Kaplan, an associate professor of clinical neurology at New York University School of Medicine and a practicing neurologist in Lake Success. Kaplan, who has no involvement in this study, has practiced Transcendental Meditation for 30 years.

In the study, the patients who meditated also had a more stable autonomic nervous system response. This system oversees the body’s stress response. And Kaplan suspects that the more balanced autonomic nervous system keeps the body’s metabolic system (insulin and blood glucose) in line. Merz and her colleagues suspect that Transcendental Meditation may modulate a person’s response to stress. Patients in both arms of the study received the best of cardiac care, including education in diet and lifestyle changes.

Transcendental Meditation involves the repetition of a sound, or mantra, over a 20-minute period. Kaplan said it allows the mind to quiet down while maintaining heightened awareness as the body experiences a deep physical rest.

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