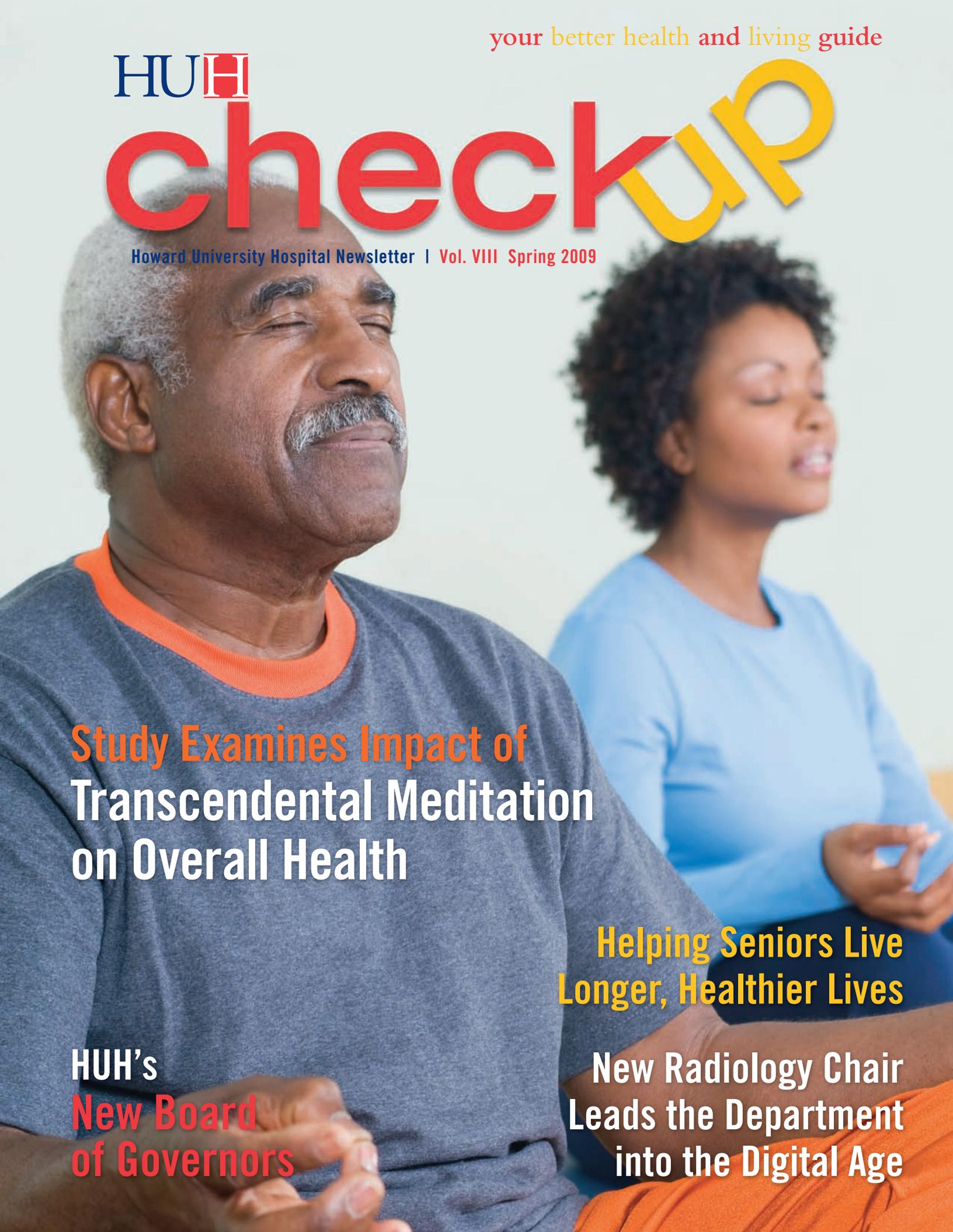


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Study Examines Impact of Transcendental Meditation on Overall Health

BY OTESA MIDDLETON MILES

Doctors and researchers believe the relaxation caused by meditating may possibly decrease activity in the sympathetic nervous system, which in turn might cause the smooth muscles in the arteries to relax.

Most people with high blood pressure know they should exercise daily, cut down on their salt intake, refrain from smoking, reduce their saturated fat intake and eat more fruits and vegetables.

But should they meditate twice daily as well?

A clinical study at Howard University Hospital (HUH) is delving into that question by studying African Americans over the age of 40 with high blood pressure.

“This is unconventional medicine,” says Dr. O. S. Randall, the lead investigator on the meditation study and a professor of medicine in the Division of Cardiology at HUH. “Since people are going to use alternatives and spend money and possibly put themselves at risk, we want to prove whether or not it works—otherwise it is an opinion.”

Dr. Randall and his colleagues will enroll 152 African-American men and women to participate for 16 weeks to determine if high blood pressure is actually lowered by simply meditating. The study will be ongoing for four years as it enrolls participants on a rolling basis.

At the beginning of the study medical information will be collected, including blood pressure. Study participants will then be divided into two groups and will receive standard education on combating hypertension, including information on lifestyle changes such as improving diet and increasing exercise. Half of the participants will be randomly assigned to meet as a regular support group, while the other half will be taught transcendental meditation. At the end of the study blood pressure readings will be collected again to determine if those who meditated had lower blood pressure than those in the control group. The study is blinded, meaning the medical staff will not know which individuals are in which group until the study ends.

AN EXPERIMENT TO HELP LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE

Earlier studies have shown that transcendental meditation can lower blood pressure in some patients—a welcome

development, since this results in a health improvement without additional medicine. The study at HUH—“Mechanisms of Meditation in Hypertensive African Americans”—is funded by a \$3.5 million grant from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health and is done in conjunction with Maharishi Institute of Management in Fairfield, Iowa. All of the research will take place at HUH, while the administrative work will be completed at Maharishi.

Dr. Randall says that focusing on African Americans is important because high blood pressure has a harsher impact on this group. “Blacks tend to get it at an earlier age,” he says. “It then goes to higher levels and causes more complications.”

According to the American Heart Association, compared to Caucasians, African Americans have a 1.5 times greater rate of heart disease deaths and a 1.8 times greater rate of fatal stroke because of the increased impact of high blood pressure. The association also notes that cardiovascular disease, which often starts with high blood pressure, is the leading cause of death for African Americans, resulting in 100,000 deaths each year. Almost half of African Americans over the age of 20 have cardiovascular disease, according to the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

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“The TM technique involves sitting quietly in a chair with the eyes closed. It is very easy and effortless once one has learned it. But you can’t teach yourself to do it.”

Bandy says learning transcendental meditation takes an hour per day for four days.

“After that, they practice it on their own, allowing the mind to settle down in a very natural way. Then the body settles down with it,” Bandy says. “They experience a state of restful alertness. It is more

restful than sleep, but the mind is still alert.”

Doctors and researchers believe the relaxation caused by meditating may possibly decrease activity in the sympathetic nervous system, which in turn might cause the smooth muscles in the arteries to relax. When these muscles relax and therefore dilate, they widen, causing the blood pressure to go down. Because of this, people who are taking medications that also work on the sympathetic nervous system won’t be enrolled in the study. However, Dr. Randall says even those who can’t participate in this study will receive additional information and support. “I will talk to them since I’m a specialist in high blood pressure,” he says. “Some will also get referred for special things they might not know about for high blood pressure and they can always call our office to get more information. If they agree to it, we’ll call them to see if they qualify for future studies.”

Dr. Randall hopes people will be eager to enroll in the study as a way to possibly improve their own health and to assist in answering questions on this alternative way to treat high blood pressure.

DEEP RELAXATION TO HELP RELIEVE STRESS

Karen Bandy has been a transcendental meditation instructor since 1977 and is teaching the practice to participants in the study.

“It’s a very deep rest to get rid of stress and fatigue,” Bandy says about transcendental meditation, which is also sometimes called TM. “We hope to normalize blood pressure.”

“We teach the transcendental meditation technique and then have follow-up meetings to make sure the people in the study are doing it properly at home in the morning and afternoon for 20 minutes each time,” says Bandy, who also teaches at the TM Center in Bethesda, Md.

“To encourage participation we are placing ads in local papers and on radio stations, using word of mouth, putting information on poster boards at the Hospital and at outside businesses, going to churches and attending health fairs,” says Dr. Randall, who has conducted two previous studies on meditation. ✓

To participate in the study, please call 202-865-5466.

Participants must:

- Be at least 40 years old;
- Have blood pressure between 140–159 mmHg systolic (top number) or 90–99 mmHg diastolic (bottom number); and
- Be an African American.

Participants will receive a \$20 transportation and parking stipend for each session.