

Meditation May Soothe Stressed Hearts

Daily Meditation May Reduce Heart Disease Risks

By Jennifer Warner, WebMD Medical News
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Putting your mind at ease with daily meditation may make your heart healthier, too.

A new study suggests that meditation may improve the ability of the blood vessels to relax and reduce the risk of heart disease.

Researchers found that four months of meditation significantly improved the ability of the blood vessel lining, known as the endothelium, to expand and contract in a group of black adolescents with high blood pressure.

“Our blood vessels are not rigid pipes,” says researcher Vernon Barnes, MD, a physiologist at the Medical College of Georgia, in a news release. “They need to dilate and constrict, according to the needs of the body.

“Dysfunction in the ability of the endothelium to dilate is an early event in heart disease, a process that starts at a young age,” says Barnes.

Barnes presented the results of his study this week at the Annual Scientific Conference of the American Psychosomatic Society in Vancouver, Canada.

Meditation Helps the Heart

In the study, researchers looked at the effects of daily transcendental meditation on blood vessel function in 111 black adolescents with high blood pressure. Half of the youths meditated by allowing their mind to settle to minimal activity for 15 minutes twice a day, and the other half received only health education.

Blood vessel function was measured in both groups using ultrasound imaging at the beginning of the study and four months later.

The results showed that the youths who practiced regular meditation experienced a significantly greater improvement in their blood vessels' ability to relax in response to stress compared with those who didn't meditate (2.5% improvement vs. 0.5% in the comparison group).

“If this improvement in the ability to dilate can be replicated in other at-risk groups and cardiovascular disease patients, this could have important implications for inclusion of meditation programs to prevent and treat cardiovascular disease and its clinical consequences,” says Barnes. “We know this type of change is achievable with lipid lowering drugs, but it's remarkable that a meditation program can produce such a change.”

“Change can't be expected overnight,” says Barnes. “Meditation and other positive lifestyle habits such as exercising and eating right have to become part of your life, like brushing your teeth.”

Researchers say long-term studies are needed to determine the long-term impact of meditation on the risk of heart disease.

SOURCES: 63rd Annual Scientific Conference of the American Psychosomatic Society, Vancouver, Canada, March 2-5, 2005. News release, Medical College of Georgia.