

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Meditate Your Way to Optimal Health

As a holistic health-care practitioner, Dr. Gravesen encourages patients to seek out natural sources of optimal health. Meditation is one of these sources.



Read on to learn the specific reasons Dr. Gravesen encourages patients to consider meditation.

Strengthens the Brain

Researchers at UCLA have determined that key regions in the brains of long-term meditators are larger than the same regions in people who do not meditate. In addition, they found that meditating may prevent age-related shrinkage of the brain, or atrophy. This may, in turn, stave off dementia. And, people who meditate have stronger connections between brain cells (*NeuroImage* 2011;57:1308-16).

The study consisted of 27 active meditation practitioners and 27 control subjects, who were matched by age and sex.

Lead investigator, Eileen Luders, explains: “Our results suggest that long-term meditators have white-matter

fibers that are either more numerous, more dense or more insulated throughout the brain.”

“It is possible that actively meditating, especially over a long period of time, can induce changes on a micro-anatomical level.”

“Meditation, however, might not only cause changes in brain anatomy by inducing growth but also by preventing reduction,” Luders adds. “That is, if practiced regularly and over years, meditation may slow down aging-related brain atrophy, perhaps by positively affecting the immune system.”

“Meditation appears to be a powerful mental exercise with the potential to change the physical structure of the brain at large.”

Powerful Pain-Reliever

Meditation produces powerful pain-relieving effects in the brain, according to research published the *Journal of Neuroscience*.

“This is the first study to show that only a little over an hour of meditation training can dramatically reduce both the experience of pain and pain-related brain activation,” says study co-author Fadel Zeidan, PhD.

“We found a big effect – about a 40 percent reduction in pain intensity and a 57 percent reduction in pain unpleasantness. Meditation produced a greater reduction in pain than even morphine or other pain-relieving drugs, which

typically reduce pain ratings by about 25 percent.”

For the study, 15 healthy volunteers who had never meditated attended four, 20-minute classes to learn meditation (*J Neurosci* 2011;31:5540-8).

Both before and after meditation training, study participants’ brain activity was examined using a special type of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). During these scans, a pain-inducing heat device was placed on the participants’ right legs for a five-minute period.

The scans taken after meditation training showed that every participant’s pain rating was reduced, with decreases ranging from 11 to 93 percent.

At the same time, meditation significantly reduced brain activity in areas of the brain crucially involved in creating the feeling of pain. It also increased activity in areas of the brain that block pain.

“One of the reasons that meditation may have been so effective in blocking pain was that it did not work at just one place in the brain, but instead reduced pain at multiple levels of processing,” comments study co-author Robert C. Coghill, PhD.



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“This study shows that meditation produces real effects in the brain and can provide an effective way for people to substantially reduce their pain without medications,” adds Dr. Zeidan.

Another study looked at individuals who had suffered pain for at least six months. Half of the patients participated in a 16-hour course that highlighted several stress-reduction techniques, including meditation. More than 78 percent of the participants said that they were satisfied with their treatment. What’s more, compared with the results of tests conducted at the study’s onset, patients showed significant reductions in pain severity and reported that pain interfered less with their daily activities (*Clin J Pain* 1999;15:50-7).

Stress Stopper

Stress relief is the most widely acclaimed advantage of meditation. Those who meditate describe dramatic drops in anxiety, a decreased likelihood to lose their temper and an increased ability to manage stressful situations.

How does meditation slash stress? Research shows that, compared with non-meditators, those who meditate have lower blood levels of stress-provoking steroids, such as cortisol. In addition, meditating promotes the production of hormones that encourage relaxation, including melatonin. Melatonin also regulates normal sleep patterns, further promoting well-being.

And, squashing stress doesn’t only lead to peace of mind — it may also save your life! A plethora of serious health conditions are associated with mental anxiety, including heart disease and possibly some forms of cancer.

Mind Mender

Another widely acclaimed benefit of regular meditation, say proponents, is heightened mental alacrity. Meditation helps clear the mind of “clutter,” allowing the practitioner to enjoy elevated levels of concentration.

This welcomed side effect of meditation probably stems from its capacity to quell stress hormones, which inhibit mental focus.

Blood Pressure Buster

Meditation may keep blood pressure under control, according to a report in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*. As part of the study, investigators looked at 18 people who meditated and 14 people who did not.

During the first phase of the analysis, both groups rested with their eyes open for 20 minutes. During the second session, the meditation group meditated, while the control group relaxed with their eyes closed.

During both sessions, clinicians ascertained the level of constriction in the subjects’ arteries, a measure related to blood pressure. The meditation group showed a 6.5 percent drop in arterial constriction during meditation, compared with a 1.6 percent increase in the control group during eyes-closed relaxation (*Psychosomatic Medicine* 1999;61:525-31).

Heart Healer

Meditation can boost heart function in patients with coronary artery disease, according to scientific research. For example, one experiment tracked 21 individuals with coronary artery disease. Half of the volunteers took meditation classes. After eight months, subjects who meditated exhibited a 15 percent jump in exercise tolerance, as well as significant reductions in other risk factors of heart disease, compared with control participants (*Am J Cardiol* 1996;77:867-70).

Meditating also reduces blood levels of chemicals associated with heart disease, called lipid peroxides, according to researchers (*Psychosom Med* 1998;60:38-41).

Tummy Tamer

Here’s some news to calm a sour stomach: According to ongoing research, meditation may mitigate the symptoms of several gastrointestinal

disorders, such as irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis (*Semin Gastrointest Dis* 1999; 10:14-9).

It seems that these conditions are aggravated by the biochemical changes associated with emotional stress — a chain of events that may be modified with meditation.

Skin Soother

Want a healthy complexion? According to researchers, meditation may clear skin lesions (*Psychosom Med* 1998;60:625-32).

One study enrolled 37 patients with psoriasis who were undergoing ultraviolet light therapy. During treatment, half of the patients were asked to listen to meditation audiotapes. Subjects in the meditation group improved much more rapidly than those who did not listen to the tapes.

Immunity Increaser

The key to meditation’s healing properties may lie in its ability to bolster the immune system, a link recently examined by investigators studying athletes.

The immune system is temporarily suppressed following strenuous exercise. This post-exercise dip in immune function is evidenced by an increase in specific blood chemicals. However, these blood chemicals are significantly less abundant in athletes who meditate (*Br J Sports Med* 1995;29:255-7).

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