

## **HEALTH BENEFITS OF MEDITATION**

**It's a piece of advice yogis have given for thousands of years: take a deep breath and relax. Watch the tension melt from your muscles and all your niggling worries vanish. Somehow we all know that relaxation is good for us.**

Now the hard science has caught up: a comprehensive scientific study showing that deep relaxation changes our bodies on a genetic level has just been published. What researchers at Harvard Medical School discovered is that, in long-term practitioners of relaxation methods such as yoga and meditation, far more "disease-fighting genes" were active, compared to those who practised no form of relaxation.

### **Health Benefits of Deep Relaxation**

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The next time you tune out and switch off and let yourself melt, remind yourself of all the good work the relaxation effect is doing on your body. These are just some of the scientifically proven benefits ...

#### **1. INCREASED IMMUNITY**

Relaxation appears to boost immunity in recovering cancer patients. A study at the Ohio State University found that progressive muscular relaxation, when practised daily, reduced the risk of breast cancer recurrence. In another study at Ohio State, a month of relaxation exercises boosted natural killer cells in the elderly, giving them a greater resistance to tumours and to viruses.

#### **2. EMOTIONAL BALANCE**

Emotional balance, means to be free of all the neurotic behavior that results from the existence of a tortured and traumatized ego. This is very hard to achieve fully, but meditation certainly is the way to cure such neurosis and unhealthy emotional states. As one's consciousness is cleansed of emotionally soaked memories, not only does great freedom abound, but also great balance. As one's responses then are not colored by the burdens one carries, but are instead true, direct and appropriate.

### **3. INCREASED FERTILITY**

A study at the University of Western Australia found that women are more likely to conceive during periods when they are relaxed rather than stressed. A study at Trakya University, in Turkey, also found that stress reduces sperm count and motility, suggesting relaxation may also boost male fertility.

### **4. RELIEVES IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME**

When patients suffering from irritable bowel syndrome began practising a relaxation meditation twice daily, their symptoms of bloating, diarrhoea and constipation improved significantly. The meditation was so effective the researchers at the State University of New York recommended it as an effective treatment.

### **5. LOWERS BLOOD PRESSURE**

A study at Harvard Medical School found that meditation lowered blood pressure by making the body less responsive to stress hormones, in a similar way to blood pressure-lowering medication. Meanwhile a British Medical Journal report found that patients trained how to relax had significantly lower blood pressure.

### **6. ANTI-INFLAMMATORY**

Stress leads to inflammation, a state linked to heart disease, arthritis, asthma and skin conditions such as psoriasis, say researchers at Emory University in the US. Relaxation can help prevent and treat such symptoms by switching off the stress response. In this way, one study at McGill University in Canada found that meditation clinically improved the symptoms of psoriasis.

### **7. CALMNESS**

The simple difference between those who meditate and those who do not, is that for a meditative mind the thought occurs but is witnessed, while for an ordinary mind, the thought occurs and is the boss. So in both minds, an upsetting thought can occur, but for those who meditate it is just another thought, which is seen as such

and is allowed to blossom and die, while in the ordinary mind the thought instigates a storm which rages on and on.

## How to switch off stress

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How can you use relaxation's healing powers? Harvard researchers found that yoga, meditation and even repetitive prayer and mantras all induced the relaxation effect. "The more regularly these techniques are practised, the more deeply rooted the benefits will be," Jake Toby says. Try one or more of these techniques for 15 minutes once or twice a day.

**Body Scan:** Starting with your head and working down to your arms and feet, notice how you feel in your body. Taking in your head and neck, simply notice if you feel tense, relaxed, calm or anxious. See how much you can spread any sensations of softness and relaxation to areas of your body that feel tense. Once you reach your feet, work back up your body.

**Breath Focus:** Sit comfortably. Tune into your breath, follow the sensation of inhaling from your nose to abdomen and out again. Let tension go with each exhalation. When you notice your mind wandering, return to your breath.

**Mantra Repetition:** The relaxation response can be evoked by sitting quietly with eyes closed for 15 minutes twice a day, and mentally repeating a simple word or sound such as "Om".

**Guided Imagery:** Imagine a wonderfully relaxing light or a soothing waterfall washing away tension from your body and mind. Make your image vivid, imagining texture, colour and any fragrance as the image washes over you.