

millimeters when you are young, if you can maintain that into adulthood, you can significantly reduce your risk for cardiovascular disease,” he says.

High blood pressure affects one in four American adults and is a major risk factor for heart attack and stroke, the first and third leading causes of death, respectively, according to the National Center for Health Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “This is not a problem that occurs suddenly at age 45 or 50,” Dr. Barnes says. “High blood pressure seems to start at a younger age than we have previously thought.”

Dr. Barnes first identified students with high-normal pressure based on three consecutive screenings in the Richmond County, Ga., school system, then randomly assigned them to the transcendental meditation program or a 15-minute health education program based on National Institutes of Health guidelines that included no intervention.

The transcendental meditation group meditated for 15 minutes twice daily – once at school and once at home – and twice daily at home during the weekend. All study participants wore 24-hour blood pressure monitoring devices. Researchers also looked at other factors that might affect blood pressure, including body mass index, weight, body surface area and environmental stress.

“Once the program stopped, we had a follow-up at four months and their blood pressures were still down,” Dr. Barnes says of the meditation group, but long-term studies are needed to see the impact of reduced pressure on disease development.

Meditation has been shown to reduce sympathetic nervous system response and stress hormone levels, ultimately reducing the heart’s

workload. “These events may result in improved myocardial and vascular function, leading to decreased [blood pressure] levels, thereby helping to prevent early onset of hypertension,” he and his colleagues at the MCG Georgia Prevention Institute write.

The medical community is increasingly accepting the health benefits of transcendental meditation, Dr. Barnes says, as these types of studies document its impact on the body and mind.

Meditation is an easy sell once people practice it, says Dr. Barnes, who has used the technique since 1972 and taught it since 1974. “Anyone can meditate and anyone can benefit. There are many benefits in terms of developing your own potential.”

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