

Meditation Technique Helps Lower Blood Pressure

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Transcendental meditation is an effective alternative to blood pressure-lowering medication, according to the results of a study involving African Americans.

People may choose to try to lower their blood pressure naturally, "but it matters what you do," study author Dr. Robert H. Schneider of the Maharishi University of Management in Iowa told Reuters Health. "Not everything has the same effect."

"You can lower your blood pressure naturally using a particular mind-body technique, transcendental meditation," Schneider said.

Transcendental meditation (TM) is a technique for calming the body and mind. "It does not involve any change in philosophy, religion, or lifestyle," Schneider said, but is simply an "effortless" technique that allows one to be "wide awake but not thinking"—i.e., in a state of "restful alertness."

African Americans are known to have disproportionately higher rates of coronary heart disease, stroke and kidney disease than whites. Research has also shown that African Americans tend to have more severe high blood pressure as well as lower rates of treatment. The reason for the higher rates of hypertension among blacks is unknown, but reports suggest that psychosocial stress may play a role.

Previous research has touted the benefits of transcendental meditation on blood pressure. In the current study, Schneider and his colleagues compared the effects of meditation and two other stress reduction techniques among 150 African-American men and women receiving treatment for high blood pressure.

Study participants were divided into groups that, along with their usual medical care, participated in 20 minutes of transcendental meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, or conventional health education classes twice daily. Their blood pressures were measured periodically at three-month intervals.

Men and women who practiced transcendental meditation showed the greatest decreases in blood pressure, decreases that were sustained for over a year, the

researchers report in the American Journal of Hypertension.

The meditation technique also appeared to help decrease study participants' need for blood pressure-lowering medications. In contrast, those in the muscle relaxation group and those who participated in the conventional classes used more medication than they had initially, the report indicates.

Women who practiced the meditation technique had much greater decreases in their total blood pressure than those in the other two groups, whereas men in the meditation group had a greater decrease in diastolic blood pressure—the lower reading—only, in comparison to those in the health education classes. Also, there did not seem to be any difference between men who used meditation and those who used muscle relaxation to lower stress.

The reason for the discrepancy between men's and women's results is unknown. The researchers' "best hypothesis" is that "women practiced (the meditation technique) more regularly," Schneider said.

In other findings, the meditation technique also "seemed to have a holistic effect," Schneider said. In addition to lowered blood pressure, some study participants said their psychological health and well being also improved.

"It seems that this is a technique to wake up the body's own healing abilities," Schneider said.

While the study group was limited to African Americans, Schneider believes the results are generalizable to other groups as well. Transcendental meditation is a practical technique for the prevention of heart disease, he said.

Its "self-management technique" allows people to avoid "the harmful side effects of medication and to save costs as well," since it does not require any external equipment or frequent contact with the healthcare system, Schneider said.

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