

About meditation

The ancient practice of meditation has many well-known health benefits. It can help reduce stress, control chronic pain and even keep ageing at bay. Anyone can meditate, and here's how you can get started.

Numerous international studies have proven the health benefits of meditation. And the best bit is, you don't need to be skilled in ancient Eastern traditions to meditate – anyone can do it. The most important thing to remember is that meditation is an antidote to stress. Modern-day stress can weaken our immune systems and put us at a higher risk of diseases, including heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis and even cancer.

Proven benefits

Studies have shown that the average woman over 40, who deals with work, children, relationships, and her changing life and body, faces about 50 stress responses a day. Even as early as the 1960s, Dr Herbert Benson, a cardiologist and an associate professor at Harvard Medical School, was able to link meditation to a decrease in stress and ageing. He measured the blood pressure, heart rate, brainwaves and rate of breathing of a group of people who practised Transcendental Meditation, and found that these were slower than in people who didn't meditate. Transcendental Meditation is the trademarked name of a meditation technique introduced in 1958 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. But it

simply involves sitting quietly for 20 minutes a day, with your eyes closed, while reciting a mantra.

Total wellness

Dr Bernie Siegel, a surgeon and professor at Yale University, says: 'Meditation tends to normalise blood pressure, pulse rate and levels of stress hormones in the blood. It raises the pain threshold and reduces one's biological age. In short, it reduces wear and tear on both body and mind, helping people live better and longer.' Dr Siegel's Mind/Body Medical Institute surveyed women who did 15-20 minutes a day of some kind of meditative activity. The study reported a 58 per cent reduction in premenstrual symptoms and significant decreases in menopausal symptoms. They also gained a more positive attitude about their body's changes, with fewer anxieties and negative thoughts.

The relaxation response

You don't have to stick to Transcendental Meditation to get these positive health benefits. Any meditation technique that results in what Dr Benson calls 'the relaxation response' will improve the health of your mind and body.



So, what are you waiting for?

Here's how: Find a quiet space, get comfortable and begin by counting down your breaths from 10 to one.

It's then up to you whether you just observe your breath or repeat a mantra (a word, verse or phrase) to help still your mind. You can also focus on a candle or an image of nature.

Don't be put off if, at first, you find it difficult to still all the thoughts rushing through your mind. This is normal. Don't try to stop them, just let them pass.

Set an alarm clock – it's too distracting to keep looking at a watch – and aim for five minutes of meditation twice a day when you start. When you feel comfortable with this, meditate for 10, then 15, then 20 minutes at a time.

If sitting in meditation is painful, you can lie on your back with your arms loosely at your sides. But keep your attention focused on your breath, or your mantra, so you don't go to sleep.

Do it your way

If you're not quite sure how to go about meditating, try a guided meditation CD. You'll find them at bookshops and online stores. Or, instead of straight meditation, you may prefer to do exercise with a meditation content, such as Tai Chi. Another way you can get the benefits of a daily relaxation practice, is by simply sitting still twice a day while you listen to music or look at a beautiful view.

