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Meditation and Health – the Research

The three main principles of Qigong practice are the concentration of body movements, the breath and the mind. Qigong has both a dynamic (Yang) and stillness (Yin) component. Qigong can be referred to as a mindful or meditation practice.

The term *meditation* refers to a variety of techniques or practices intended to focus or control attention. Most meditative techniques are rooted in Eastern religious or spiritual traditions and have been used by many different cultures throughout the world for thousands of years. Today, many people use meditation outside of its traditional religious or cultural settings to improve their health and wellness.

Researchers have been collecting data on meditation for many years and countless studies have shown that meditation has not only a mental but a physiological effect on the body. Many of the findings show that, among other benefits, meditation can help reverse heart disease, reduce pain and enhance the body's immune system.

In one area of research, scientists are using sophisticated tools to determine possible changes in brain function. With the use of MRI technology, researchers at Harvard Medical School found that meditation affects parts of the brain that are in charge of the autonomic nervous system which governs the functions of our organs, muscles and body systems. Stress compromises these functions so it makes sense to harmonise these functions to help ward off stress-related conditions such as heart disease, digestive problems and infertility.

In a study published in the journal *Stroke*, a control group of 60 people with atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, practised meditation for six to nine months. The meditators showed a decrease in the thickness of their artery walls, while the non-meditators actually showed an increase. The change for the meditation group could potentially decrease their risk of heart attack by 11% and the risk of stroke by 8 -15%.

Another study, published in *Psychosomatic Medicine*, taught mindful meditation to a group of 90 cancer patients. After seven weeks, those who meditated reported that they were less depressed, anxious, angry and confused than the control group, which hadn't practised meditation. The meditators also had more energy and fewer heart and gastrointestinal problems than did the other group.

Researchers for a study published in the *Public Library of Science* shows that peaceful thoughts can influence our bodies, right down to the instructions we receive from our DNA. Researchers took blood samples from a group of 19 people who habitually meditated or prayed for years, and 19 others who never meditated. They found that the meditating group suppressed more than twice the number of stress-related genes – about 1,000 of them – than the non-meditating group.

The more these stress-related genes are expressed, the more the body will have a stress response, and over long periods of time these stress responses can increase inflammation, and worsen high blood pressure, pain syndromes and other conditions. According to leading researcher Dr Herbert Benson, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, meditation breaks the train of everyday thought thereby reducing stressful thoughts and allowing the body to return to a healthy state.

Dr Dean Ornish, professor of medicine and founder of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute at the University of California at San Francisco, recently found a relationship between meditation and genes in prostate cancer. These preliminary findings suggest that meditation, when combined with better nutrition and moderate exercise, might favorably alter gene expression in prostate tissue.

Another small study published in *Menopause: The Journal of the North American Menopause Society*, showed that menopausal women who participated in a stress reduction program that included meditation experienced significant relief from hot flashes and improvements in their quality of life.

While western scientists are still exploring exactly how and why meditation works, we already know that it has both physiological and psychological benefits. Many therapists now consider it a valid complement to more traditional therapies and anything that helps fight stress is a welcome tool.

Reprinted from *The Art of Life*, by Simon Blow. www.simonblow.com