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12 Reasons To Meditate And 3 Steps To Get Started

Over the years, meditation has gone from a fringe activity to part of the mainstream, improving people's ability to deal with everything from depression to dieting. It's powerful and easy to learn!



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Cardio, weights, and yoga—they all address the physical part of your workout program. But what about the mental side that affects your ability to stay calm, persevere through your workout, and remain confident and optimistic? Could it be that you're overlooking an activity that addresses this aspect of your overall health?

Meditation is often written off as something for monks sitting in caves. But an increasing amount of research shows that mediation can help many people in many different ways.

To see what you have to gain, check out the following 12 benefits of meditation. Then see how easy it is to start your own meditation practice in 3 simple steps.

1. Lower Risk Of Depression

Depression can—and does—happen to many people at some point in their life. Despite the fact that it can be very serious and can require medical care, it is far too often undiscussed and untreated. Exercise and a healthy diet with plenty of omega-3 fatty acids can help prevent depression, as can meditation.

Research indicates that meditation can be just as powerful as antidepressant medications. This doesn't mean you should suddenly toss your pills in the trash, assume the lotus position, and meditate your depression away. (Not a good idea!) But it does illustrate the power of meditation.[1]

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2. Reduced Stress And Anxiety

Whether you're stressed out about an upcoming exam, a work presentation, or hitting your target PR, meditation can help you calm down.

Too much daily stress can increase the amount of cortisol in your system, which can lead to increased body fat. Research strongly suggests that meditation may be one of the best techniques to help alleviate stress and anxiety, and reduce cortisol levels.[2]

3. Enhanced Sleep Quality

Getting enough sleep each night can improve your workouts and help you recover faster. Most people need 8-9 hours of [sleep](#), but many get no more than five or six.

Research suggests that meditation can improve sleep quality, allowing you to wake up rested and full of energy. By meditating right before bed, you can increase your odds for sleeping soundly.[3]

4. Chronic Pain Management

Are you dealing with chronic pain from an illness or injury? Research published in the journal *Pain* suggests that meditation may help to improve your pain-management ability and reduce the discomfort you may feel.[4]

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5. Improved Self-Control

One of the biggest challenges facing people who are dieting is managing their cravings. Once again, it's meditation to the rescue.

Meditation can improve the functioning of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with impulse control. The better this part of the brain functions, the more you're able to withstand food cravings.

Research published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* indicates that people who are leaner tend to have stronger dorsolateral prefrontal cortexes than those who are overweight or obese.[5]

6. Slower Cognitive Decline

Being physically active can make you look and feel younger. But time marches on, and just as the rest of your body ages, so does your brain. But there are steps you can take to stay mentally sharp as you age.

According to research published in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*, people who practice meditation and yoga experienced a slower decline in intelligence levels and brain function compared to those who didn't.[6]

7. Improved Memory

In addition to reducing the symptoms of age-related cognitive decline, meditation may also help give your memory a boost. Research published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* noted that when subjects meditated, they showed improvements in their working-memory capacity.[7]

8. Decreased Blood Pressure

High blood pressure affects many adults and is a major contributor to heart disease and stroke. A good diet is key to avoiding high blood pressure, but much of the cause can stem from life itself.

If high blood pressure is a concern of yours, meditation can help. Research suggests that by helping to calm the mind, meditation can help to lower systolic blood pressure—especially among those who suffer from moderate levels of anxiety.[8] Systolic pressure is the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart beats.

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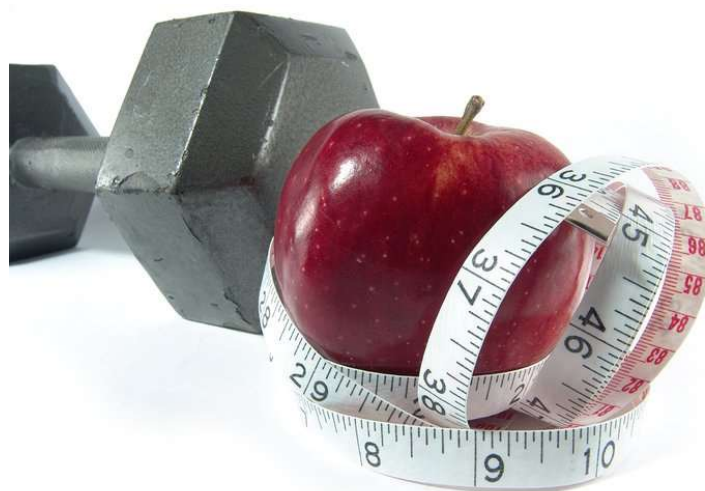
9. Stronger Immune System

Research published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* notes that the body's immune system can be supported through regular meditation, too. This is particularly important for people who work out intensely.[9]

Intense physical activity affects the body in many ways, good and bad. If you work out hard, you're taxing your immune system and need to find ways to support it. One good way, in addition to a good diet and ample sleep, is meditation.

10. Improved Insulin Sensitivity

Insulin resistance is a serious condition that can lead to obesity and type 2 diabetes. Intense weightlifting can improve your insulin sensitivity and help prevent these conditions from taking hold. Research suggests that meditation also might help protect against insulin resistance, and make it easier for you get and stay lean.[10]



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11. Relief From PMS

Women might be interested in research published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. In the study, researchers found that women who meditated experienced less severe premenstrual symptoms like bloating, cramping, fatigue, and irritability.[11]

12. Reduced Binge Eating

Finally, if you indulge in the occasional (or more frequent) bout of binge eating, you'll be glad to know that meditation may help put the brakes on this, too.[12]

Binge eating can quickly derail any well-planned diet and set back your progress toward weight-loss goals. If sitting quietly might be able to help you get a handle on it, it's worth a try!

Start Your Meditation Practice Today

Here are a few simple steps to begin meditating, so you can start reaping the many benefits it has to offer.

1. Find somewhere quiet, preferably dark or dimly lit. Sit on a chair or the floor. Place an object in front of you, like a candle, a piece of sculpture, or a piece of fruit.
2. Once in position, begin by focusing on your breathing. Take a few deep breaths in and out. Feel your rib cage expanding with each inhalation. Push out the breath, trying to remove as much air from your lungs as possible.
3. Now, breathing normally and with your eyes partially closed, gaze at the object in front of you. Focus only on that object. Acknowledge other thoughts as they come to mind, then return to paying attention to your breath and the object in front of you.

That's all there is to it. There's nothing magical about meditating. It's just a matter of sitting quietly, acknowledging the thoughts that come into your mind, then gently turning your attention away from those thoughts and back to your breath or your object.

With practice, you may be able to reach a point where you can sit for 5-10 minutes effortlessly dismissing thoughts and sounds as they intrude upon your mind.

Start by meditating 5-10 minutes a few times per week. Just as you use progressive overload in the gym to build muscle, you can also increase week by week the time you spend in meditation.

References

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