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"I'm proud of
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Meditate:
it's healthy!

Quote of the month
"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication"
- Leonardo da Vinci



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Exercise: **Meditation**

Meditation benefits

- A more relaxed, happier attitude.
- Enhanced immune function.
- Less minor illnesses, and increased resistance to chronic ailments.
- De-ageing effect on hormonal system.
- Glowing skin.
- Less of the stress hormone cortisol.
- Enhanced creativity and brain power.

Learn to meditate

Meditation is an age-old practice that bestows a raft of benefits on the mind and body. Discover how to meditate your way to better health and happiness. By Nikki Goldstein.

DOCTORS RECOMMEND IT. Scientists are now proving its health-giving powers and millions of people – who are not members of strange religious cults – practise it every day. Meditation is a take-anywhere, anti-stress strategy that really works. Meditating for 40 minutes each day can help relieve stress, alleviate depression, reduce the risk of heart disease and can even help beat the flu. But if 40 minutes sounds daunting, don't panic. Even five to 10 minutes of meditation twice a day will help you to significantly increase your level of health and happiness.

It might seem obvious to any busy person that sitting comfortably with your eyes closed would make you feel more relaxed. Who doesn't long for an excuse to take some down time to chill out? However, evidence is increasingly mounting that meditation does a lot more than just make you feel calm or 'blissed out'.

In a study published in 2003 by the American journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, doctors from the University of Wisconsin in Madison gave flu shots to both non-meditators and newly-taught meditators. They found that the meditators had more antibodies in their blood after four and eight weeks than non-meditators. Researchers speculate that regular meditation may result in a healthier immune system.

"The human body has an immense capacity to heal itself, given the right conditions," says Dr Craig Hassad, a senior lecturer in Monash University's Department of General Practice in Melbourne. The 'right' conditions are when your mind and body are relaxed (a state that, ideally, you would carry with you throughout your day).

Researchers from the University of Wisconsin also made some surprising discoveries about how something as simple as meditation can actually alter the brain and the way we behave. In 2001, Dr Richard Davidson, who is internationally renowned for his research into meditation and emotions, used brain imaging to show that meditation shifts activity in the prefrontal cortex – right behind your forehead – from the right hemisphere to the left. Simply translated, this means you are more likely to be relaxed and happy. People who have a negative disposition tend to be right-prefrontal orientated; those with a left-prefrontal tendency

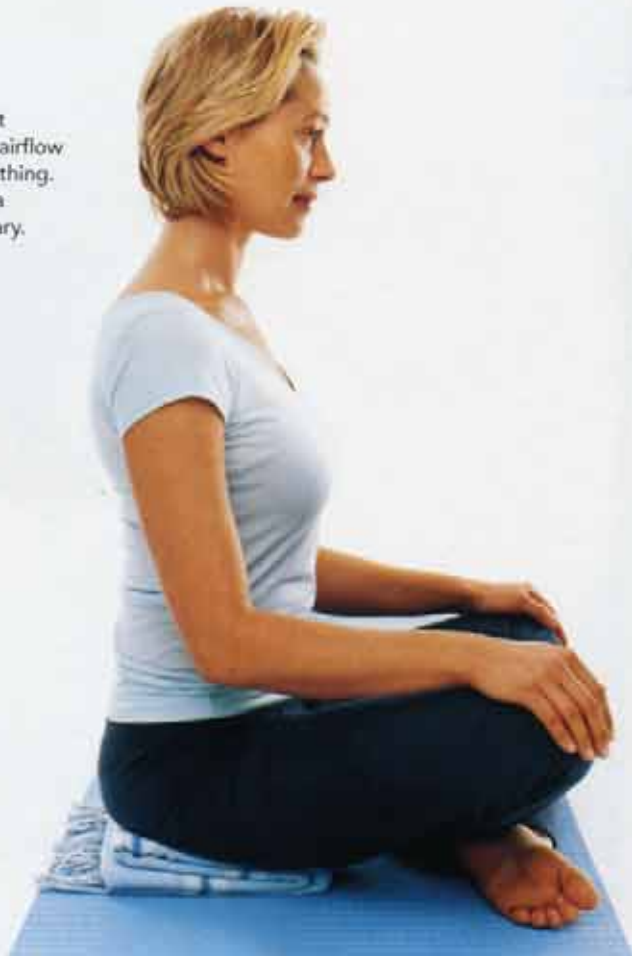
Even just 10 minutes of meditation twice a day can have a beneficial effect on your health and happiness.

Fitness: Meditation

Find a quiet place away from distraction. Have a wrap or blanket on hand to keep warm.



Sitting upright enables clear airflow for deep breathing. Lean against a wall if necessary.



are the opposite. Dr Davidson's research also suggested that, through regular meditation, the brain is reorientated from a stressful flight-or-fight mode to one of calm and acceptance.

If that's not enough to get you interested in meditation, this might: meditation can actually help you look and feel younger.

According to a study published in the American *Psychoneuroendocrinology* journal in 1997, meditation increases the production of a youth hormone called DHEA, which drops off as we age. This hormone is vital to maintaining libido, body fat ratio, energy and memory, and in protecting against high levels of the ageing stress hormone cortisol.

Says Erica Angyal, a nutritionist and author of *Gorgeous Skin in 30 Days* (Lothian Books, 2005): "Production of DHEA in turn causes your pituitary gland to release more of the anti-ageing growth hormone HGH, which has a powerful impact on how your skin looks and ages."

In one study on meditation (published in the *International Journal of Neuroscience*), participants practising for five years were physiologically 12 years younger than their non-meditating counterparts! Even the short-term participants were physiologically five years younger than the control participants. One reason among many to get meditating.

Getting started

The question that remains, of course, is how do you actually meditate? To novices, the whole process can seem confusing and even a bit 'hippy trippy'. But meditating is actually easier than you might imagine. In fact, most of us have dabbled in

meditation or self-hypnosis by consciously relaxing ourselves in stressful situations, such as a visit to the dentist or before a test.


To meditate, first find a room, or even a space, where you can sit without being disturbed by children, partners, pets or a ringing phone. It could be indoors or outdoors.

Many people think that you have to meditate in silence but this is not true. You can play something relaxing, whether that's classical music or the sounds of nature – rock or pop music isn't any good. Or you might like to try meditating using a tape or CD for help. Internationally-acclaimed intuitive counsellor, author, teacher and life coach Tricia Brennan has a series of meditation CDs that address different mind-body aspects of health (for details, visit www.triciabrennan.com).

Once you have chosen your environment and music or sounds, you need to get into a relaxed posture. Yes, you can sit on the floor, but if you need a bit of back support, a chair is okay too. Before settling in, you may like to light a candle, or some incense to get you more in the mood.

Now, take a deep breath in, hold it to the count of four then exhale and repeat. You should let your awareness focus on the rhythm of your breath. As a result, your breathing will become slower and deeper, and your mind more tranquil and aware.

With repeated effort the goal of clearing your mind – to think of nothing – will occur and the process of meditation will take on its own energy. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to meditate; it's all about letting go. With time and practice, the more you do, the better you will get at it. And before very long, you will start to see and feel the benefits of meditation. ■



Morning meditation will set you in good stead for the rest of the day, while night-time meditation assists good sleep.

Practising meditation

- Can't get yourself disciplined enough to sit still for at least 10 minutes every day? Attending a meditation class is a great way to get started and you will have the guidance and support of a teacher, should you have any questions. To find a class near you, contact your local Buddhist centre, yoga school or community college.
- Your local library will have a selection of books on meditation. *Buddhism for Busy People* by David Michie (Allen & Unwin, 2004) is a good starting point for those interested in learning more about Buddhist meditation.