
Meditation: How to Get Started

Meditation can support your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. There are many types of meditation, but it can be as simple as sitting and focusing on your breathing.

STUDIES SUGGEST MEDITATION MAY HELP:¹⁻²⁷

- Addictions
- Anxiety
- Attention/focus
- Autoimmune diseases
- Brain function
- Cardiovascular health
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Fatigue
- Glaucoma
- Immune system function
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Pain
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Sleep
- Stress

What Is Meditation?

Meditation is an umbrella term for mind-body practices that help calm your mind, focus your attention, and heighten internal awareness.^{28,29} Several forms of meditation have been practiced in various cultures for centuries.

According to national surveys, around 15% of adults meditate in countries including the United States, Britain, and Germany.³⁰⁻³² In India, where certain types of meditation originated, an average of 48% of adults meditate.³³

Though there are many different kinds of meditation, they tend to share common elements, including:²⁸

- **Minimized distractions.** You don't need complete silence. However, you should be free of distractions trying to interact with you, such as other people or your phone.
- **Focused attention.** You might use a word or phrase, a physical object, a visualized object, sounds, or your breathing to help focus your attention.
- **Open attitude.** You aim to let distracting thoughts, emotions, or physical symptoms come and go without analyzing or judging them.

One of the most commonly practiced types of meditation is mindfulness meditation.³⁴ It is designed to help you focus on the present moment.³⁵ This can help bring about physical and mental relaxation, but that is just one of the many ways meditation may help you.²⁹

Why Meditate?

When you quiet your mind through meditation, it could have far-reaching benefits on your health. It may do this in several ways, including:

- **Reducing cortisol.** This stress hormone stays at high levels when stressful events frequently occur, even after the stressful event ends.^{36,37} That increases your risk of dysfunction and disease.

Tech & Meditation

Meditation apps can help guide your practice. These apps typically include audio-guided meditation sessions, among other features.

Some popular meditation apps tested in studies and linked with health benefits include:^{36,49,50}

- [Calm.com](https://www.calm.com)
- [Headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)
- [HeartsApp.org](https://www.heartsapp.org)

Some meditation apps are free or provide a free trial. Before you use any new app, check the company's privacy policy so you know how your data may be used, such as to target ads to you. You might be able to opt out of that.

- **Lowering blood pressure.** High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease.^{38,39}
- **Reducing inflammation.** One way meditation may reduce inflammation is by "turning off" certain genes.^{40,41}
- **Balancing gut bacteria.** Over the long term, meditation may promote a healthier, more diverse community of gut bacteria.^{42,43}
- **Altering brain structure.** Changes in brain structure and the connections between different parts of your brain may support better brain function.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶

Scientists continue to study the many ways meditation could benefit health. Highly advanced technology is making this easier.

How to Meditate

If you're new to meditation, you may start with just a few minutes and gradually work up to longer sessions. On average, mindfulness meditation takes between 5 to 45 minutes.²⁹ If you must stay on a schedule, you can set a timer. For example, use a gentle smartphone alarm, download an app that times your meditation, or use a kitchen timer.

Simple steps for mindfulness meditation include:²⁹

- **Get comfortable.** You can sit on the floor or in a chair. Or, you can stand, lie down, or slowly walk while you meditate. If you sit, keep your back straight (to support breathing) and drop your shoulders. You can gaze steadily ahead or downward. If you aren't walking, you may close your eyes to help tune out distractions.
- **Focus on breathing.** The goal isn't to think about your breathing or to change it. Instead, simply observe how your belly rises and falls or how the air feels in your nostrils as you breathe. This can help you tune into the present moment.
- **Notice when your mind wanders.** Observe what drew your attention away from your breathing, then gently redirect your attention back to breathing. Realize that thoughts are just thoughts. Let them pass through without judgment. This mental exercise takes practice.

There are many variations of the above technique. One is to add a body scan.²⁹ To do this, lie down on your back and scan each part of your body, starting with your feet and continuing up to your head. When you notice an area of discomfort, focus on your breathing to see if you can relax that body part and then move on to the next part of your body.

Making Meditation Work for You

Find a time to meditate that fits your schedule. For many people, early in the morning works best. However, another time of day may suit you better. Some people meditate over their lunch break. Another option is to meditate in the evening, but if it's too late, you may find it more difficult to stay awake.



Are you unsure if meditation is right for you? Try it every day for one week. How does it feel setting aside a short time every day where you just breathe? If one type of meditation doesn't work for you, seek another type better suited to your spiritual or cultural practices and needs.

If you have a medical condition, use meditation alongside your prescribed medical treatment, not in place of it. Meditation may not be advised if you are dealing with unresolved trauma, depression, thoughts of suicide, or active substance abuse.⁴⁷ Starting a new meditation program on your own when dealing with such challenges may trigger more anxiety or distress.⁴⁸ Seek professional guidance in such cases.

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