

A Pause That Refreshes

A new study shows what we knew all along: Meditation can boost immunity. By Linda Knittel

If you want to strengthen your immune system, just quiet your mind and breathe deeply. At least that is the implication of a new study published in *Psychosomatic Medicine*; it found that people who participated in eight weeks of meditation training had a stronger immune response to a flu vaccine, and possibly more positive thoughts, than those who didn't meditate.

The study followed 48 healthy male and female coworkers ages 23 to 56. Half (chosen randomly) participated in weekly three-hour sessions of mindfulness meditation training at work. They were also encouraged to meditate on their own for an hour a day, six days a week, with the help of instructive audiotapes. The other half were told they were wait-listed for the meditation training.

Researchers then measured brain electrical activity in the meditators and those in the control group. Why measure electrical activity in the brain? Because the front left portion of the brain becomes more active when a person experiences positive emotions and low levels of anxiety. The activity was measured while participants were resting and also while they were writing about positive or negative emotional experiences; the measurements were taken before and immediately after the eight-week trial, and then were taken again four months later.

To test immunity, all the subjects were given a flu vaccine at the end of the eight weeks. The research team tracked their immune responses by measuring the level of antibodies produced by the vaccine at the four-month point.

The results of both parts of the study indicated that the brains of those who meditated had significantly more activity in the area of positive emotions and that their bodies produced more flu-fighting cells, meaning they were better prepared to fight illness. What's more, the subjects whose brains registered the most electrical activity in the front left portion also had the greatest immune response.

Just how meditation increases immunity is still unclear, although a key aspect seems to be deep, rhythmic breathing. Deep breathing stimulates the circulation of lymph throughout the body, a process that removes toxins from tissues and organs.

Despite the fact that this study was conducted using a small number of participants who were asked to meditate for only eight weeks in the confines of their demanding work environment, it strongly suggests that a short-term training program in mindfulness meditation can have positive effects on brain and immune function.

Linda Knittel is a nutritional anthropologist and freelance writer in Portland. She is the author of *The Soy Sensation* (McGraw Hill, 2001). May/June 2004 This article can be found online at http://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/1229_1.cfm

