

Melatonin Mantra

People who meditate have long known that this practice has positive health benefits that include improved energy and calmness of mind. Research now shows that meditation also increases levels of melatonin, an important hormone that supports the immune system, promotes deep and restful sleep, slows cell damage and aging, improves energy and may even inhibit the growth of cancer cells.

Melatonin is produced by the pineal gland of the brain. The philosopher Rene Descartes called this tiny gland "the seat of the soul". In the Hindu spiritual tradition, meditation techniques are used to direct energy flow through seven energy centers in the body, or chakras, and selectively activate or suppress their associated glands. The pineal gland corresponds to a chakra located at the top of the head and is believed to influence happiness.

The scientific connection between melatonin and meditation was first explored in 1995 by researchers at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center's Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program. Since melatonin is produced mainly at night, overnight urine samples were collected and tested for 6-sulphatoxymelatonin, a melatonin breakdown product considered to be an accurate reflection of blood melatonin levels. Researchers found that women who meditated had significantly higher levels compared with women who did not.

A recent study published in the journal *Biological Psychology* confirmed this finding. The researchers found that meditation before bedtime increased melatonin levels for that night. No increases in blood melatonin levels were noted on nights where participants did not meditate. This suggests that regular practice of meditation is necessary.

How to Meditate

Here are two meditation techniques that are based on those used in the research studies. For maximal benefit, try to meditate for twenty minutes to half an hour before you go to sleep using the technique that feels more comfortable for you.

Method 1: Mindfulness

- Find a quiet and comfortable place. Sit in a chair or on the floor with your head, neck and back straight but not stiff. Try to put aside all thoughts of the past and the future and stay in the present.

- Become aware of your breathing, focusing on the sensation of air moving in and out of your body as you breathe. Feel your belly rise and fall, the air enter your nostrils and leave your mouth. Pay attention to the way each breath changes and is different.

- Watch every thought come and go, whether it be a worry, fear, anxiety or hope. When thoughts come up in your mind, don't ignore or suppress them but simply note them, remain calm and use your breathing as an anchor.

- If you find yourself getting carried away in your thoughts, observe where your mind went off to, without judging, and simply return to your breathing. Remember not to be hard on yourself if this happens.

- As the time comes to a close, sit for a minute or two, becoming aware of where you are. Get up gradually.

Method 2: Relaxation Response

- Find a quiet place and sit in a comfortable position. Try to relax your muscles.
- Choose a word or phrase that has special meaning to you and makes you feel peaceful. Or you can try the words "Ham Sah", a Sanskrit mantra meaning "I am that".
- As you breathe in, slowly produce the sound "hammm" as if you are sinking into a hot bath. As you exhale, slowly produce to sound "saah", which should feel like a sigh.
- Breathe slowly and naturally. Inhale through your nose and pause for a few seconds. Exhale through your mouth, again pausing for a few seconds.
- Don't worry about how well you are doing and don't feel bad if thoughts or feelings intrude. Simply say to yourself "Oh well" and return to your repetition.
- As the time comes to a close, continue to be aware of your breathing but sit quietly. Becoming aware of where you are, slowly open your eyes and get up gradually.