



Why I Tell All My Heart Patients to Try Meditation

By Daniel Chong, N.D.
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In Brief

- Chronic stress can increase the risk of heart disease, but meditation offers a practical, evidence-based way to protect your heart.
- Studies show that practices such as mindfulness and Transcendental Meditation can lower blood pressure, reduce stress, and improve emotional well-being, helping cardiovascular patients reduce their risk of heart attacks and strokes.
- Even just a few minutes a day may make a difference. **Read on for insights from a physician specializing in heart health.**

As a physician specializing in heart health, I often meet patients with cardiovascular disease who are also grappling with chronic stress. The demands of modern life—managing a demanding job, navigating family responsibilities, or coping with health challenges—can take a significant toll on the heart and blood vessels.

For these patients, I emphasize meditation as a cornerstone of a comprehensive stress-management toolkit to help prevent heart attacks and support long-term cardiovascular health. By calming the mind, meditation offers a practical, evidence-based way to help protect the heart, and emerging research continues to highlight its potentially profound benefits.

Why Stress Matters for Your Heart

Stress is more than an emotional burden; it's a physiological stimulus that can directly harm arterial health. When stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline surge, they elevate blood pressure, increase heart rate, and promote inflammation—all key contributors to the progression of heart disease.

For patients with existing cardiovascular disease, such as hypertension or coronary artery disease, these effects can be particularly dangerous, increasing the risk of heart attacks. The American Heart Association notes that chronic stress is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular events, as it worsens conditions such as atherosclerosis.

Stress often intersects with mental health challenges like anxiety and depression, further increasing heart disease risk. A [2018 scientific review published in *Circulation*](#) found that individuals with high stress and poor mental health had a 27% higher risk of major cardiovascular events.

How Meditation Supports Heart Health

Meditation can serve as a powerful antidote to stress. By engaging in regular mindfulness meditation practices or focused breathing, patients activate the body's relaxation response, which counteracts the stress response. This process lowers cortisol levels, reduces blood pressure, and stabilizes heart rate, all of which are critical factors for those with cardiovascular disease.

Unlike some other interventions, meditation is accessible to most, cost-free, and can be tailored to fit into busy schedules, making it an ideal tool for heart patients seeking to regain control over their health.

Two landmark studies underscore meditation's benefits for cardiovascular health.

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Transcendental Meditation and Heart Events

A 2012 study [published in *Circulation*](#) followed 201 African American patients with coronary heart disease. Some participants were randomly assigned to begin practicing Transcendental Meditation, while others were assigned to a control group receiving health education. Over five years, the meditation group experienced a 48% reduction in heart attack, stroke, and death compared with a control group, alongside significant reductions in blood pressure and stress levels.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

Another [study](#) examined adults participating in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs, which typically involve eight-week courses with guided meditation, body scans, and gentle yoga. The meta-analysis found that MBSR significantly reduced stress and improved symptoms of anxiety and depression. It also showed modest benefits for physical health, such as lower blood pressure and improved immune function. For heart patients, these stress-reducing effects may complement traditional treatments and support overall cardiovascular health.

The Mind-Heart Connection

Chronic stress and poor mental health can disrupt the autonomic nervous system, which regulates heart rate and blood pressure. Over time, this imbalance strains the cardiovascular system, potentially increasing the likelihood of plaque buildup and heart rhythm disturbances.

Meditation can help restore balance by enhancing parasympathetic activity, promoting relaxation and reducing strain on the heart. A study published in [Frontiers in Psychology](#) found that mindfulness practices can improve emotional regulation, which in turn can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. For cardiovascular patients, this dual benefit—calming the mind while protecting the heart—can be incredibly powerful.

Practical Tips for Getting Started

Incorporating meditation and breathing techniques into daily life also doesn't require hours of practice. Here are

some tips for beginners.

Start small: For my patients, I recommend starting with just five to ten minutes of mindfulness meditation, based on guidelines for [MBSR](#) by Jon Kabat-Zinn, or even just spending a few minutes a few times a day focusing on slow, intentional breathing, while gently extending the exhale.

Build a habit: I advise setting a consistent time, perhaps in the morning or before bed, to build a habit.

Use guided apps: Apps like Headspace and Calm provide structured meditations for beginners. Insight Timer is free and offers thousands of guided sessions, plus timers and ambient sounds to help you focus and relax.

Try simple techniques: [Diaphragmatic breathing](#) can be done anywhere.

Integrate with other heart-healthy habits: For those with cardiovascular disease, I emphasize integrating meditation with other heart-healthy practices, such as a whole-food, plant-based diet and regular exercise, as part of a holistic approach.

While meditation is not a cure-all, its ability to reduce stress and support mental and cardiovascular health makes it a vital tool. By addressing the mind-heart connection, patients can take proactive steps to lower their risk of heart attacks and improve their quality of life.

For those navigating the challenges of cardiovascular disease, meditation offers a path to resilience, empowering them to protect their hearts while finding calm amidst life's storms that are really just rolling through.