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Can stress-reducing Transcendental Meditation help CHD patients prevent future heart attacks?

NIH/National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute provides \$1 million for new study at Columbia University Medical Center

The National Institutes of Health's National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute will fund a \$1 million collaborative study by the Center for Natural Medicine and Prevention at Maharishi University of Management Research Institute and Columbia University Medical Center to determine whether the stress-reducing Transcendental Meditation technique can help patients with coronary heart disease (CHD) prevent future heart attacks, strokes and death.

The 12-week "Randomized Controlled Trial of Stress Reduction in the Secondary Prevention of Coronary Heart Disease in African Americans," will be conducted at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. The trial will examine 56 patients who have had a heart attack or bypass surgery, angioplasty, or chronic angina.

"For decades, stress has been implicated in the cause and progression of heart disease," said Robert Schneider, M.D., F.A.C.C., lead author and director of the NIH-funded Center for Natural Medicine and Prevention. "And while standard cardiac rehabilitation usually includes supervised exercise and lifestyle education, it does not usually include a formal stress reduction program.

"Now, for the first time, this study will evaluate whether adding stress reduction through the Transcendental Meditation technique to conventional cardiac rehabilitation will aid in the treatment of serious CHD compared to conventional cardiac rehabilitation alone," Dr. Schneider said.

Patients will be carefully evaluated before and after the study for changes in their coronary artery disease with the most advanced noninvasive methods for measuring cardiac function—PET or positron emission tomography. According to Sabahat Bokhari, MD, Director of Nuclear Cardiology at Columbia University Medical Center and study co-director, "PET is an innovative imaging technology that allows us to visually and non-invasively study blood flow to the heart. With this state-of-the-art technology, doctors can now measure the blood flow to the heart and thus quantify the full impact of stress reduction on CHD."

The NIH funding allocation is part of the Obama Administration's American Reinvestment and Recovery Act—or economic stimulus bill. Competition for the funding was fierce with more than 20,000 applications for the Challenge Grants category and only 840 awarded. "In the current climate of health care reform, the purpose of this grant is to find more effective treatments for heart disease and thereby find more effective ways to reduce health care costs," Dr. Schneider said.

"The NHLBI's Recovery Act funds will make it possible to evaluate Transcendental Meditation as a promising tool in helping to prevent heart attacks, strokes, and death related to coronary events. This is worthwhile research since we know that strong emotional stress can lead to conditions such as arrhythmia and hypertension," said NHLBI Director Elizabeth Nabel, M.D.

Results from several earlier trials on the Transcendental Meditation program found reductions in risk factors for heart disease, such as hypertension, psychological stress, insulin resistance, and build-up of atherosclerosis in the arteries, with indications of reduced mortality from heart disease. This newly funded study will directly evaluate coronary artery disease and continue to examine the potential of meditation for improvements in cardiovascular health.

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Fast Facts on Coronary Heart Disease:

- Coronary heart disease (CHD) is the leading cause of death in the United States
- There are nearly 1.5 million heart attacks per year in the US, according the American Heart Association
- An American will suffer a heart attack every 34 seconds
- Coronary heart disease is also the leading cause of soaring health care costs; more than \$475 billion spent annually on treating CHD, including
 - \$100,000 for each coronary bypass surgery
 - \$50,000 for each angioplasty
 - \$30,000 for each diagnostic cardiac catheterization
- There are nearly 500,000 coronary artery bypass grafts and 1.3 million angioplasties performed every year
- Stress is thought to contribute to development of CHD

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