

Stressed? Just a couple minutes of meditation might help.

A large body of research shows that meditation benefits the brain, but how much is required is less clear. This study suggests that a little bit goes a long way.

April 23, 2026 at 6:00 a.m. EDT Today at 6:00 a.m. EDT

Research has long shown that [meditation](#) influences brain function, but exactly when changes begin after starting — and how they evolve with continued meditation — has been less clear. A recent study suggests even a few minutes of the practice can positively affect your brain.

In the [study](#), published in the March edition of Mindfulness, researchers analyzed electroencephalogram (EEG) brain wave data of 103 people practicing isha yoga breath watching, a simple meditation that involves paying attention to natural breathing. With this type of meditation, you bring your focus back to the inhale and exhale if your mind wanders. Previous studies have shown this quiet, attentive state can [promote relaxation](#) and lower stress levels.

The study included people who had never meditated, those who were new at it and those who had advanced experience. The researchers looked at how the participants' brain wave activity changed during a 10-minute meditation session. Within [just two or three minutes](#), all groups showed EEG changes that suggest a more relaxed state.

Study co-author Balachundhar Subramaniam, neuroscientist and professor of anesthesiology at Harvard Medical School, said he and his colleagues wanted to build on existing research about the [benefits of meditation](#) to reduce the barrier to entry. "Many people want evidence before they start something," he said. "Now that we have peer-reviewed literature showing even a short duration of engaged practice can change the way your brain reacts to a situation, it might prompt people to start."

Meditation's effects on the brain

Meditation is generally defined as "putting focus on something," said Helen Lavretsky, geriatric integrative psychiatrist and professor in residence in the psychiatry department at UCLA Health. Whether that focus is on breathing, sounds or mantras, it can have both short- and long-term benefits for the brain.

Meditation primarily affects the brain's executive function, or the ability to manage and regulate what you think, feel and

do. When practicing it regularly, “we see the executive network become more intentional, so you’re more in the driver’s seat of thoughts, emotions and impulses,” said Cortland Dahl, research scientist at the University of Wisconsin Center for Healthy Minds.

Studies suggest meditation may increase brain thickness in areas related to emotional regulation and sensory processing, and that it may reduce emotional reactivity, boost cognitive functions such as focus and attention, and improve stress resilience. Meditating can also make you more resilient to stress and your body less reactive to it, decreasing [blood pressure](#), heart rate and stress hormone levels.

Achieving ‘relaxed alertness’

How long you need to meditate to experience the benefits has not been as rigorously studied, Lavretsky said.

In the new study, researchers explored these relaxation benefits by analyzing levels of different brain wave frequencies in participants during the meditation. Gamma brain waves, the highest-frequency waves, are associated with fast brain activity, such as [anxious thoughts](#). Slower beta brain waves represent active thinking, alpha are even more relaxed, theta represent a drowsy state, and delta waves are present during deep sleep.

After just two or three minutes of meditation, participants of all experience levels showed an increased relaxation response. They had heightened alpha and theta wave activity, and decreased delta and gamma activity, with the response peaking between 7 and 10 minutes of meditation. Subramaniam described this state as “relaxed alertness,” a calm but focused state that eases stress while promoting problem-solving and creativity.

What that looks like in the real world: Imagine [you feel stressed](#) due to a challenging work project. “If you have a drink, alcohol might help you relax, but your senses are blunted,” Subramaniam said. “With meditation, you get the relaxation, but you also have alertness that can help you solve the issue at hand.”

While the study looked at [focused breathing](#), experts say any type of meditation can yield similar results. As with physical exercise, there are many forms of mental training, and the important thing is to find one you enjoy. “People often ask what’s the best practice, and it’s the one you actually do,” Dahl said.

With any form of meditation, consistency is indeed an important factor, Subramaniam said. The study shows even beginners can benefit from a quick meditation, but advanced meditators consistently had higher calm-but-alert brain waves throughout the practice.

How to make meditation part of your routine

Meditation can seem intimidating, but studies suggest it may be just as effective if you're not sitting down and focusing on it. You can achieve a meditative state while you're walking, commuting or doing laundry. "These active practices in your normal, everyday life can benefit just as much," Dahl said.

Here are a few ways to easily work meditation into your routine:

- Take a couple of slow, deep breaths, focusing on a longer exhale and pausing before your next inhale. According to Lavretsky, this turns off the body's stress response, and promotes physical and mental calm.
- Similarly, try a minute or two of [humming](#) — or if you're on a stressful work call, let out a big sigh. (Just don't forget to mute yourself first.) Lavretsky said both humming and sighing can stimulate the vagus nerve, which helps calm down the body's stress response.
- When you're doing a chore or other menial task, think about the *why* behind it — for example: "I'm doing dishes so my house is clean, because I love my family and want to take care of them." "Changing your perspective on the things you already do, to link what you're doing with core values and deeper motivations, can make activities feel much more meaningful," Dahl

said.

- Spend a few minutes thinking about or [writing down what you're grateful for](#). Dahl said this appreciation meditation can train your mind to notice positive things in other realms and promote connection to others, which has mental, emotional and physical health benefits.
- To try different forms and lengths of meditation, download a meditation app such as [Calm](#), [Insight Timer](#), [Headspace](#) or the [Healthy Minds Program app](#), created by Dahl's center at the University of Wisconsin.

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a diverse range of perspectives on meditation, with many users sharing personal experiences and emphasizing the importance of commitment and regular practice for achieving its benefits. Some recommend meditation apps and techniques, while others highlight the...

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