



How much meditation do we really need to do (and why)?

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One of the most important life skills to possess is that of meditation. Aside from being an incredibly potent tool for enabling us to relax, it goes far deeper than that and meditation is genuinely one of the healthiest approaches we can take to look after ourselves mentally, emotionally, physically and even spiritually. Furthermore, the most recent research conclusively demonstrates that meditation is one of the most powerful anti-ageing strategies that there is. The question is – how much meditation do we actually need to do, to reap the health and anti-ageing benefits of this very simple approach?

We are all ageing, all the time, however the sad truth is that those of us who live in a Western environment and are exposed to standard Western diets, environmental pollution, and the general stress of living day-to-day lives are actually ageing faster than people who live in a more natural, rural type of environment.

The hormonal problem:

One of the first systems in our bodies to wear out is the endocrine system; the hormonal master system that regulates everything that happens in our bodies. The production of critically important hormones such as human growth hormones (HGH) begins to tail off after the age of 30. HGH produced by the pituitary gland is vitally important in helping us feel energetic, keeping our immune system in optimal shape, repairing muscles, having good cognitive function, emotional resilience, and even looking younger, feeling sexier and more motivated.

Another hormone that is intrinsically interlinked with ageing is DHEA, which is produced by our adrenal glands. DHEA declines considerably over time and this decrease causes innumerable problems as it is a precursor hormone to our sex hormones. Essentially, our bodies utilise DHEA to produce oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone. Once DHEA goes into decline, we experience numerous problems including the inability to maintain a good mood, a stable body fat to muscle ratio, high energy levels and a normal sex drive. DHEA is crucial in protecting us against the damage of the stress hormone cortisol which, when elevated can damage our immune system and will cause memory loss and dramatically accelerated ageing.

Too much stress in our lives also causes our hypothalamus (a gland that we can think of as the 'brain's brain') to decline in function. When the hypothalamus declines it becomes unable to perfectly balance all of our systems. In this unbalanced state sometimes it calls for the production of too few hormones and sometimes too many. Naturally this degeneration leads to dysfunction of the entire endocrine system. This causes damage to both body and mind.

Overall, it is this inability to regulate hormones that is the root trigger that underlies most of the problems we associate with ageing.

The cellular problem

On a cellular level, our telomeres bear the brunt of the ageing process. Telomeres were discovered by the brilliant Nobel Prize-winning scientist Elizabeth Blackburn. These are repeating sets of DNA that act as a protective cap that shields the ends of our chromosomes. This is important because each time our cells divide our DNA is copied, but it wears down with each division. It is possible to ascertain a person's biological age by measuring telomere length – with shorter telomeres being directly associated with older biological age. As if this incredible discovery wasn't enough, Blackburn next discovered an enzyme called telomerase that can protect and rebuild telomeres. The question then was: what can we do to produce more telomerase?

It turns out that there is a startlingly simple solution – that is connected to even more of Blackburn's work. Blackburn was contacted by a post-doc researcher called Elissa Epel who had a hunch that stress might cause premature ageing. Epel suggested to Blackburn that they ought to look at the effects on telomere length of intense stress. They conducted a lengthy study among women who were looking after very sick children and discovered that on average these women had telomeres that were ten years shorter than women who looked after children that were not sick. In fact, this incredible discovery was the first time that real people's lives had ever been connected to the inner workings of the cell, proving once and for all that feeling stressed doesn't just damage our health – it actually ages us.

It turns out that the most powerful and reliable way of reducing the effects of stress and producing more telomerase – and therefore getting biologically younger - is through meditation. But, just how much meditation do we really need? The rule of thumb in most meditation approaches is that you need to do 20 minutes twice a day. This recommendation for frequency and duration comes directly from the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement as this is the technique that has been practised and researched for many years.

However, the latest research on meditation has attempted to really drill down to ascertain exactly what 'dose' is really required in order to gain all of the health and anti-ageing benefits that we already know happen with longer meditation sessions. In fact, dramatic changes to our health and well-being occur with just 12 minutes of meditation per day, making it much easier to implement in a busy life. This fascinating discovery was reported

recently in the International Journal of geriatric psychiatry by a team of researchers that included both Elizabeth Blackburn and Elissa Epel.

I personally believe that short duration meditation makes meditation much more attractive and more accessible to all of us living in the Western world. As a Zen meditation teacher myself I am well aware that students are keen to practice but there put off by the sheer amount of time that the accepted wisdom dictates that they need to practice for. But now that we know that only 12 minutes a day can confer all of the well-being and anti-ageing benefits that we seek it means that people are much more likely to want to practice. I have personally experienced huge transformations in my own life through meditation. I practice a form of Zen meditation that is linked to the Mind/Body Medicine training I undertook at Harvard Medical School under Dr Herbert Benson, the 'Father' of Mind/Body meditation and the genius behind the Relaxation Response meditation technique. I have a free instructional recording for you at JayneyGoddard.com