

Simple, low-cost steps enhance adolescents' health

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These types of side-effect-free steps can quickly help lower important numbers like [blood pressure](#), heart rate and even weight, counteracting today's unhealthy, upward trends among young people, said Dr. Vernon Barnes, physiologist at the Medical College of Georgia's Georgia Prevention Institute.

A [positive attitude](#) and family environment increases the effectiveness of the interventions, Dr. Barnes reported in one of three studies presented at the American Psychosomatic Society Annual Meeting in Portland,

Ore. The study comparing breathing awareness meditation to [health](#) education and life-skills training found that all methods improved blood pressure.

Dr. Barnes, who has studied the impact of meditation on cardiovascular health for more than a decade at MCG, has documented the improved stress reactivity in black adolescents with high normal blood pressures as well as lower blood pressures in black, inner-city adolescents who meditate twice daily.

Meditation also sharpens the mind for education. "When you come to school with a stressed mind, you can't do as well," Dr. Barnes said. "The benefit of calming your mind is preparing it to learn." A review of school records showed meditating adolescents miss fewer days and generally behave better, he added.

Another study showed that the blood pressure of students in a high school-based walking program decreased after just 16 weeks compared with non-participating peers. Dr. Barnes, part of an adult team competing with a group of high school students to see which can walk the farthest, said the pedometer is an incentive to move. "You think about it: that little extra walking will hopefully benefit your health," said the researcher who finds himself making efforts to increase his step numbers daily.

"It all works together, which makes sense," he said, looking at the impact of the techniques over just a few months. While decreases in blood pressure were small - a 2.5 point reduction in pedometer wearers compared to a 3.5 point increase in the control group - it's good momentum.

"If you could maintain that decrease into your adult years, it may decrease cardiovascular disease risk," Dr. Barnes said.

Researchers also reported reductions in anger and anxiety after a dozen, 50-minute classes on the topics taught by health teachers. Psychosocial factors such as anger are known to contribute to a wide range of health problems including elevated blood pressures and heart disease in adulthood. But Williams LifeSkills workshops helped adolescents learn to analyze a situation before responding, to listen and empathize or even stand firm when necessary. "The workshop has scenarios drawn from real life," said Dr. Barnes.

Provided by Medical College of Georgia

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