

# Dispositional mindfulness associated with better cardiovascular health

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Eric Loucks: “Mostly [mindfulness interventions] have been looked at for mental health and pain management, but increasingly they are being looked at for cardiovascular risk factors such as obesity, smoking, and blood pressure.” Credit: Mike Cohea/Brown University

Pay attention to the implication of these new research results: People who pay more attention to their feelings and experiences tend to have better cardiovascular health.

As noted more precisely in a new study in the *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, researchers at Brown University found a significant association between self-reported "dispositional [mindfulness](#)" and better scores on four of seven [cardiovascular health](#) indicators, as well as a composite overall health score. Dispositional mindfulness is defined as someone's awareness and attention to what they are thinking and feeling in the moment.

The study is the first to quantify such an association between mindfulness and better cardiovascular health, said study lead author Eric Loucks, assistant professor of epidemiology in the School of Public Health. It's an encouraging link for health promotion, because mindfulness can be enhanced with training.

"Mindfulness is changeable, and standardized mindfulness interventions are available," Loucks said. "Mostly they've been looked at for mental health and pain management, but increasingly they are being looked at for [cardiovascular risk factors](#) such as obesity, smoking, and blood pressure."

The connection may come about because people who are attuned to their present feelings may be better at minding and managing the various cravings—for salty or sugary foods or cigarettes or even a spell on the couch—that undermine health, Loucks said. Mindfulness interventions, for example, have already shown efficacy in helping people to quit smoking.

## Measuring mindfulness and health

In the study, Loucks and his colleagues asked 382 participants in the broader New England Family Study to answer the 15 questions of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS).

MAAS questions, rated on a six-point scale from "almost always" to "almost never" include "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present" and "I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention."

The participants also underwent tests to determine ratings on seven indicators of cardiovascular health, as suggested by the American Heart Association: smoking avoidance, [physical activity](#), body mass index, fruit and vegetable consumption, cholesterol, blood pressure, and fasting blood glucose. The researchers also noted the participants' age, race, sex, education and scores on standardized scales of depression, and sense of control in their lives.

In their analysis of the data, Loucks and his team examined the association between the degree of self-reported mindfulness and the scores on each of the seven cardiovascular health indicators, accounting for age, sex, and race. They also calculated a composite score of the health indicators.

Participants with high MAAS scores had an 83 percent greater prevalence of good cardiovascular health (as measured by the composite score) compared to those with relatively low MAAS scores. High vs. low MAAS scores were associated with significantly higher cardiovascular health on four of the seven individual indicators: BMI, physical activity, fasting glucose, and avoiding smoking.

That higher mindfulness did not also associate with higher scores for [blood pressure](#) or cholesterol may be because neither of those health indicators directly affect how someone feels in a typical moment,

whereas smoking, obesity (and closely related fasting glucose), and physical activity are all much more explicitly evident experiences for the self.

Meanwhile, fruit and vegetable consumption, an indicator of diet quality, showed a positive association with higher MAAS scores, but with too wide a range of uncertainty to be considered statistically significant.

Loucks said the next step in his research is to begin testing whether improving mindfulness can increase cardiovascular health indicators. He said he hopes to launch randomized controlled trials with long-term follow-up (because behavioral interventions often look good in the short term but then don't last).

**More information:** *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12529-014-9448-9](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12529-014-9448-9)

Provided by Brown University

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