



Relaxation Techniques: What You Need To Know

What are relaxation techniques?

Relaxation techniques are practices to help bring about the body's "relaxation response," which is characterized by slower breathing, lower blood pressure, and a reduced heart rate. The relaxation response is the opposite of the stress response.

Some of the studies discussed in this fact sheet compare relaxation techniques to cognitive behavioral therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy is a type of psychological treatment that helps a person become aware of ways of thinking that may be automatic but are inaccurate and harmful. The therapy involves efforts to change thinking patterns and usually behavioral patterns as well.



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What are the different types of relaxation techniques?

Listed below are some of the different types of relaxation techniques.

- **Progressive Relaxation:** Also called progressive muscle relaxation, this technique involves tensing different muscles in your body and then releasing the tension.
- **Autogenic Training:** Through a series of mental exercises involving relaxation and ideas you suggest to yourself (autosuggestion), your mind focuses on your body's experience of relaxation.
- **Guided Imagery or "Visualization":** In guided imagery, you picture objects, scenes, or events that are associated with relaxation or calmness and attempt to produce a similar feeling in your body.

- **Biofeedback-Assisted Relaxation:** Through feedback that is usually provided by an electronic device, you learn how to recognize and manage how your body responds. The electronic device lets you see how your heart rate, blood pressure, or muscle tension changes in response to feeling stressed or relaxed.
- **Self-Hypnosis:** In self-hypnosis programs, people learn to produce the relaxation response when prompted by a phrase or nonverbal cue (called a “suggestion”) of their own.
- **Breathing Exercises:** For breathing exercises, you might focus on taking slow, deep breaths—also called diaphragmatic breathing.

Other complementary health practices such as massage therapy, meditation, yoga, tai chi, and qigong can produce several beneficial effects in the body, including the relaxation response; however, these practices are not discussed in this fact sheet. For more detailed information on these practices, see [“Massage Therapy: What You Need To Know,”](#) [“Meditation,”](#) [“Yoga: What You Need To Know,”](#) [“Tai Chi: In Depth,”](#) and [“Qigong: What You Need To Know.”](#)

How popular are relaxation techniques?

The National Health Interview Survey, a nationally representative U.S. survey, found that 6.4 percent of U.S. adults used guided imagery and/or progressive muscle relaxation in 2022; in 2002, only 3.8 percent used these techniques.

Can relaxation techniques help during labor and childbirth?

Many women would like to use nondrug options for pain relief during labor and childbirth.

- A 2018 review included 5 studies (total of 1,248 participants) that used various relaxation techniques and measured women’s pain intensity during labor. Overall, the studies found that relaxation techniques might help women manage labor pain, but the quality of the research varied between low and very low. Also, because different relaxation techniques were used, it’s hard to say which specific techniques might help.

- A 2019 review compared women’s views and experiences of using pain medicine (epidurals, opioids) and nondrug methods (relaxation, massage) for pain relief options during labor and childbirth. Eight studies (99 women) looked at relaxation. The overall findings showed mixed experiences for both methods of pain relief. Some women who used the nondrug methods reported that they were less effective than anticipated.

Can children and adolescents benefit from relaxation techniques?

Some relaxation techniques may help children and adolescents with pain, anxiety and depression, headaches, or difficulty with needle-related procedures. But much of the supporting research was rated as low quality, so we don’t have a completely clear picture yet of the possible benefits.

Pain

- A 2017 review on **recurrent abdominal pain** in children and adolescents found that **guided imagery** and **hypnotherapy** may be helpful in reducing pain in the short term, but the quality of the research was low. The review included 2 small studies on guided imagery and 2 small studies on practitioner-led hypnotherapy (plus homework), with a total of 146 participants.
- A 2019 review of 10 studies with 697 participants looked at the effect that **remotely delivered psychological therapies** had on **chronic pain** in children and adolescents. Nine of the studies included a relaxation component in the treatment. “Remotely delivered” meant flexible, self-guided treatments that were typically internet-based and didn’t usually involve contact with a clinician. The review found that psychological therapies delivered remotely were helpful at reducing headache pain right after treatment but not later at follow up. No benefit was found for the other types of pain that were studied. Overall, the research was considered to be of very low quality.

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Headache

- A 2019 review of 7 studies involving 571 children looked at the effects of **relaxation training** on **migraine headaches, tension-type headache**, or both. Although some studies reported decreased headache frequency, duration, and intensity after relaxation training, other studies did not. Overall, the results were inconsistent, and the research was of very low quality.
- A 2016 review of 5 studies involving 137 children and adolescents found that **biofeedback** seemed to be helpful with **migraines**, especially with reducing their frequency. The number of participants in the studies, however, was small.
- A 2019 review indicated that **self-relaxation, biofeedback, and self-hypnosis** may be reasonable alternatives to using medicine in managing childhood **migraine**, particularly in adolescents. According to this review, however, some of the best evidence seen in any pediatric migraine therapy study has been for cognitive behavioral therapy added to treatment with standard antimigraine medicines.

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Can relaxation techniques lower blood pressure?

High blood pressure can lead to serious health problems, such as heart attack, stroke, heart failure, and kidney failure. Having a healthy lifestyle can help to prevent high blood pressure. One part of a healthy lifestyle is learning how to relax and manage stress.

- A 2019 review of 17 studies involving 1,165 participants indicated that ***slow breathing exercises*** led to a modest reduction in blood pressure and may be a reasonable first treatment for people with prehypertension or low-risk high blood pressure. The studies in this review, however, differed in how they were done and had short follow-up periods and high risk of bias. Also, the studies didn't look at whether slow breathing exercises ultimately influenced health outcomes, such as stroke or heart attack.
- A 2018 review found that ***relaxation therapies*** and ***biofeedback*** might be helpful for reducing blood pressure, but only weak recommendations were made for their use because the quality of data from the 29 studies ranged from low to very low.
- If you have high blood pressure, it's important to follow the treatment plan prescribed by your health care provider. Following your treatment plan is important because it can prevent or delay serious complications of high blood pressure. If you're considering a complementary or integrative approach for your high blood pressure, discuss it with your health care provider.

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