

Yoga, meditation surging in popularity in US

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(HealthDay)—If it seems like everyone you know is trying yoga or meditation, you might be right. A new government survey shows that the number of Americans practicing the "mindfulness" techniques has surged in the past few years.

In 2017, more than 14 percent of U.S. adults said they'd practiced yoga in the past year—up from 9.5 percent in 2012. Meanwhile, the number of meditation practitioners more than tripled—from 4 percent to 14 percent.

Even kids are getting into mindfulness. In 2017, the study found, more than 8 percent of 4- to 17-year-olds had practiced yoga in the past year—up from 3 percent five years earlier, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Thursday.

And while few kids were taking time to meditate in 2012 (less than 1 percent), more than 5 percent were doing so in 2017.

The survey did not ask people why they'd taken up these ancient practices. So it's not clear what's

driving the rise in popularity, said researcher Lindsey Black, of the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

She said it's unclear how many Americans might have turned to yoga or meditation to manage [health conditions](#), or simply for "general wellness." Nor did the survey ask people whether they regularly practiced or had just dabbled in the techniques.

"We just know these practices are becoming more popular," Black said.

According to marketing claims, belly breathing, tree poses and other time-honored techniques can help kids de-stress, navigate social cliques, and even fend off flu.

Adults are told they'll develop a better outlook, better posture, better sleep and more if they use their yoga tools.

Media focus could be boosting the popularity of yoga and mindfulness, said Ted Meissner, of the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness.

The university is the birthplace of [mindfulness-based stress reduction](#) (MBSR), a guided program that combines particular meditation techniques and gentle yoga. It's considered the "gold standard" mindfulness technique in scientific research.

In recent years, Meissner said, there has been a "sharp spike" in studies looking at the effects of various mindfulness approaches—such as whether they can help treat health conditions as diverse as chronic pain, heart disease, memory problems, anxiety, depression and addiction.

That has come with a surge in media coverage, Meissner said.

But much of that research has had major limitations, he added. For one, most studies have lacked "control groups" where people get some

other intervention for comparison.

The media have also given lots of attention to studies showing that when people meditate, their brain activity changes. But the significance of those findings to daily life is unknown, Meissner said.

What is [mindfulness](#)? The Center for Mindfulness offers this definition: the intention to pay attention to each and every moment of our life, non-judgmentally.

But when it comes to research, there isn't even a universally accepted definition of the term, Meissner said. It's much less straightforward than studying a drug, he noted.

For now, Meissner suggested that if people are interested in meditation or yoga, they go in with reasonable expectations. If you're looking to rid yourself of anxiety, he said, the practices may not be for you.

"Mindfulness is not a panacea," Meissner said.

He also advised "doing your homework" before investing in classes or courses. There are various forms of [yoga](#) and meditation—so understand what type you're signing up for. And, he said, check out the teacher's credentials, including whether he or she trained with a reputable program.

Even something as safe-sounding as [meditation](#) does have the potential to do harm, Meissner said, if, for example, it's touted as a replacement for standard anxiety or depression therapies.

More information: The U.S. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health has more on [meditation and health](#).

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