A wakeful hypometabolic physiologic state

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WALLACE, ROBERT KEITH, HERBERT BENSON, AND ARCHIE F. WILSON. A wakeful hypometabolic physiologic state. Am. J. Physiol. 221(3): 795–799. 1971.—Mental states can markedly alter physiologic function. Hypermetabolic physiologic states, with increased oxygen consumption, accompany anticipated stressful situations. Hypometabolic physiologic changes, other than those occurring during sleep and hibernation, are more difficult to produce. The present investigation describes hypometabolic and other physiologic correlates of a specific technique of meditation known as “transcendental meditation.” Thirty-six subjects were studied, each serving as his own control. During meditation, the respiratory changes consisted of decreased O\textsubscript{2} consumption, CO\textsubscript{2} elimination, respiratory rate and minute ventilation with no change in respiratory quotient. Arterial blood pH and base excess decreased slightly; interestingly, blood lactate also decreased. Skin resistance markedly increased, while systolic, diastolic, and mean arterial blood pressure, arterial PO\textsubscript{2} and PO\textsubscript{2}, and rectal temperature remained unchanged. The electroencephalogram showed an increase in intensity of slow alpha waves and occasional theta-wave activity. The physiologic changes during meditation differ from those during sleep, hypnosis, autosuggestion, and characterize a wakeful hypometabolic physiologic state.

METHODS

Thirty-six subjects were studied with each serving as his own control. Informed consent was obtained from each. The subjects sat quietly in a chair with eyes open for 10–30 min prior to the precontrol measurements. During the precontrol period, all subjects continued to sit quietly with eyes open or closed for 10–30 min. The subjects were then instructed to start meditating. After 20–30 min of meditation, they were asked to stop. During the postcontrol period, they continued to sit quietly with eyes closed for 10 min and then with eyes open for another 10 min. Blood pressure, heart rate, rectal temperature, and skin resistance and electroencephalographic changes were measured continuously. Other measurements were made and samples taken every
10 min throughout the precontrol, meditation, and postcontrol periods. Mean values were calculated for each subject in each period. The data from the precontrol period were then compared to those during meditation by use of a paired t test (52).

Oxygen consumption was measured in five subjects by the closed (7) and in 15 subjects by the open circuit methods (13). In the open-circuit method, expired gas was collected in a Warren E. Collins, Inc. 120 l Tisot spirometer for 6- to 10-min periods. The expired gas was analyzed in triplicate for PO2 and PCO2 with a Beckman Instruments, Inc. physiological gas analyzer model 160. Oxygen consumption, CO2 elimination, and respiratory quotients were calculated according to standard formulas (13). In all subjects tested by the closed-circuit method and in four subjects tested by the open-circuit method, a standard mouthpiece and nose clip were used. A tight-fitting face mask was made for use in 16 subjects. The face mask contained two one-way low-resistance inspiration valves (id 1.5 cm) in its sides and a one-way expiration valve (id 2.3 cm) in its front. The Tisot spirometer was weighted to ensure adequate collection, regardless of tidal volume or rate of respiration. Total ventilation was measured in the four subjects with the unweighted Tisot spirometer. Respiration rate was recorded during the closed-circuit method measurements.

Systemic arterial blood pressure was measured and arterial blood samples were obtained from a polyethylene or Teflon catheter inserted percutaneously via a 19 Courand or a Becton, Dickinson & Co. Longwell 20 g 2 in catheter needle, respectively, after local anesthesia with 5-10 ml of 1% procaine HCl (novocaine; Winthrop Laboratories, Inc.) or 2% lidocaine HCl (Xylocaine, Astra Pharmaceutical Products, Inc.). The catheters were filled with a dilute heparin saline solution (5,000 USP units Na heparin per 1 0.9% NaCl) and connected to a Statham P240 polygraph. Mean pressures were obtained by low-pass method measurements.

Electrocardiograms were recorded with a Grass Instrument Co. electroencephalograph model 6. The EEG traces were recorded with an Ampex Corp. tape recorder, model FR-1300. The skin electrodes were placed, according to the International 10–20 system, at Fp1, Cz, T3, P3, O1, O2, and A2 (26). Grass Instruments Co. gold-plated cup electrodes and EEG electrode cream were employed. Recordings were monopolar with A2 acting as the reference electrode, and the ground electrode was placed over the right mastoid bone. The EEG tracings were recorded as analog data on tape and then were converted to digital data by a Systems Data, Inc. SDS 930 computer with a nominal accuracy of one part in 2048, operating at 256 samples/sec on each channel. These digital data were subsequently processed by an IBM 360-91 computer with spectral analysis computed by the BMD X92 program (19), sampling 2 of every 15 set of data with a resolution of 1 c/sec for 32 frequencies. Every 10 samples were averaged and displayed as a time history of intensity (micron square amplitude) for each frequency and as a contour map of time vs. frequency with a representation of intensity (57). The sampling of short periods of data was used to increase the likelihood of including temporary frequency changes which might have occurred during the meditation period. Eye movements (electro-oculograms), were recorded in five subjects with the electrodes placed at E1 and A1, and E2 and A1 (45).

RESULTS

The age of the subjects ranged from 17 to 41 years with a mean of 24.1 years. There were 28 males and eight females. The length of time practicing transcendental meditation ranged from 0.25 to 108.0 months, with a mean of 29.4 months. Oxygen consumption averaged 251.2 ml/min prior to meditation, with small variation between the two mean precontrol measurements (5.3 ml/min) (Table 1). During meditation, O2 consumption decreased 17% to 211.4 ml/min, and gradually increased after meditation to 242.1 ml/min. Carbon dioxide elimination decreased from 218.7 ml/min during the precontrol period to 186.8 ml/min during meditation. Respiratory quotient prior to meditation was in the normal basal range (0.85) and did not change significantly thereafter. Minute ventilation decreased about 1 liter/min and respiratory rate decreased about three breaths per min during meditation.

Systolic, diastolic, and mean arterial blood pressure changed little during meditation (Table 1). Average systolic blood pressure before meditation was 106 mm Hg; average diastolic blood pressure 57 mm Hg; average mean blood pressure 75 mm Hg. The arterial pH decreased slightly in almost all subjects during meditation, while
Skin resistance decreased, but remained essentially constant throughout the meditation period (Table 1). The respiratory changes consisted of decreased \( O_2 \) consumption, \( CO_2 \) elimination, respiratory rate, and minute ventilation, with no change in respiratory quotient. Arterial blood pH and base excess decreased slightly; interestingly, blood lactate also decreased. Skin resistance markedly increased and the EEG showed an increase in the intensity of slow alpha waves with occasional theta-wave activity. The physiologic changes during transcendental meditation differed from those reported during sleep. The EEG patterns which characterize sleep (high-voltage slow-wave activity, 19-14 cycles/sec sleep spindles and low-voltage mixed-frequency activity with or without rapid eye movements) (45), were not seen during transcendental meditation. After 6-7 hr of sleep, and during high-voltage slow-wave activity, \( O_2 \) consumption usually decreases about 15% (8, 10, 20, 33, 47). After only 5-10 min of meditation, the rate of decrease markedly increased to 10.26 mg/100 ml per hr.

During meditation, the average heart rate decreased by 3 beats/min (Table 1). Rectal temperature remained essentially constant throughout the meditation period (Table 1). Skin resistance increased markedly at the onset of meditation, with a mean increase of about 140 kilohms (Table 1). After meditation skin resistance decreased, but remained higher than before meditation. The EEG pattern during transcendental meditation showed increased intensity (mean square amplitude) of 8-9 cycles/sec activity (slow alpha waves) in the central and frontal regions (Fig. 1). The change in intensity of 10-11 cycles/sec alpha waves during meditation was variable. In five subjects, the increased intensity of 8-9 cycles/sec activity was accompanied by occasional trains of 5-7 cycles/sec waves (theta waves) in the frontal channel (Fig. 2). Intensity of 12-14 cycles/sec waves and 2-4 cycles/sec waves either decreased or remained constant during meditation. In three subjects, who reported feeling tired and drowsy at the beginning of meditation, flattening of the alpha activity and low voltage mixed frequency waves with a prominence of 2-7 cycles/sec activity was noted. As meditation in these three subjects continued, the pattern was replaced by regular alpha activity. In the five subjects in whom electro-oculograms were recorded, no changes were observed.

### DISCUSSION

Consistent and pronounced physiologic changes occurred during the practice of a mental technique called transcendental meditation (Table 1). The respiratory changes consisted of decreased \( O_2 \) consumption, \( CO_2 \) elimination, respiratory rate, and minute ventilation, with no change in respiratory quotient. Arterial blood pH and base excess decreased slightly; interestingly, blood lactate also decreased. Skin resistance markedly increased and the EEG showed an increase in the intensity of slow alpha waves with occasional theta-wave activity.
constant while base excess decreased slightly, indicating a mild condition of metabolic acidosis. The skin-resistance changes during meditation were also different from those observed during sleep (22, 54). In sleep, skin resistance most commonly increases continuously, but the magnitude and rate of increase are generally less than that which occurred during meditation.

The consistent physiologic changes noted during transcendental meditation also differed from those reported during hypnosis or autosuggestion. During hypnosis, heart rate, blood pressure, skin resistance, and respiration either increase, decrease, or remain unchanged, approximating changes which normally occur during the states which have been suggested (5, 23, 32). During so-called hypnotic sleep, in which complete relaxation has been suggested, no noticeable change in O2 consumption occurs (5, 24, 60). EEG patterns occurring during hypnosis are usually similar to the suggested wakeful patterns and therefore differ greatly from those observed during meditation (32).

Operant conditioning procedures employing physiologic feedback can also alter autonomic nervous system functions and EEG patterns (9, 21, 28, 31, 39, 50). Animals can be trained to control autonomic functions, such as blood pressure, heart rate, and urine formation (9, 18, 39). Human subjects can alter their heart rate and blood pressure by use of operant conditioning techniques (31, 35, 50) and can be trained to increase alpha-wave activity through auditory and visual feedback (21, 28). However, the physiologic changes during transcendental meditation occurred simultaneously and without the use of specific feedback procedures.

The relative contribution of various tissues to lactate production has not been established, but muscle has been presumed to be a major source (16). The fall in blood lactate observed during meditation might be explained by increased skeletal muscle blood flow with consequent increased aerobic metabolism. Indeed, forearm blood flow increases 300\% during meditation while finger blood flow remains unchanged (46). Patients with anxiety neurosis develop an excessive rise in blood lactate concentration with “stress” (12, 27). The infusion of lactate ion can sometimes produce anxiety symptoms in normal subjects and can regularly produce anxiety attacks in patients with anxiety neurosis (41). The decrease in lactate concentration during and after transcendental meditation may be related to the subjective feelings of wakeful relaxation before and after meditation. Further, essential and renal hypertensive patients have higher resting serum lactate levels than normotensive patients (17). The subjects practicing meditation had rather low resting systolic, diastolic, and mean blood pressures.

A consistent wakeful hypometabolic state accompanies the practice of the mental technique called transcendental meditation. Transcendental meditation can serve, at the present time, as one method of eliciting these physiologic changes. However, the possibility exists that these changes represent an integrated response that may well be induced by other means.

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