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### How Homer Helps Your Heart

Rhythms of ancient poetry such as *The Odyssey* help synchronize beating and respiration rates.

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By **Randy Dotinga**  
*HealthDay Reporter*



FRIDAY, July 23 (HealthDayNews) -- Here's a good reason to skip the Cliff's Notes versions of the Greek classics: Reading poems such as *The Odyssey* aloud may help your heart.

In a new study, European researchers suggest that the rhythms of ancient poetry can synchronize the body's heart and respiration rates. Similar positive effects have been linked to the Catholic rosary prayer and the yoga mantra.

It's far from clear if doctors will ever consider prescribing required reading lists to their patients. But the results are definitely intriguing, said Francois Haas, director of cardiopulmonary rehabilitation research at New York University School of Medicine.

"If there's a message, it's that our internal rhythms can be modified by external stimuli," Haas said.

In the new study, researchers from Austria, Germany and Switzerland studied 20 healthy men and women, average age 43, who repeated parts of a German translation of Homer's *The Odyssey* after they were read to them. Machines monitored their hearts and lungs as they read.

Their findings appeared recently in the current online edition of the *American Journal of Physiology -- Heart and Circulatory Physiology*.

Even in its German translation, *The Odyssey* is written in a complicated rhythmic formula called dactylic hexameter, in which each of the six sections of a line of poetry include a long syllable followed by a long syllable, a short syllable or two short syllables.

According to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia.com, here's an example of a dactylic hexameter: "Down in a/deep dark/hole sat an/old pig/munching a/bean stalk."

As they read the verses, the breathing rates of the subjects slowed down, and their heart and breathing rates became more synchronized. The rates fell almost entirely

out of tune when the subjects breathed normally while not reading, suggesting the same thing happens in everyday life.

Previous research, which examined the effects of reciting the Rosary devotion -- also known as *Ave Maria* or *Hail Mary* -- and the "OM" yoga mantra, found that both reduced respiration levels to six breaths a minute, helping the heart work more effectively. The authors suggested the rosary may have become popular because the physiological effects of saying it made people feel better and perhaps more amenable to the devotion's religious message.

Slow breathing has been linked to lower blood pressure, said study co-author Dirk Cysarz, chairman of medical theory and complementary medicine at the University of Witten in Germany. Other studies have suggested that slow breathing helps the lungs work more efficiently, he said.

But the classical poetry must be read correctly to have an effect on the body, Cysarz noted. "If it is just mumbled, it is not helpful. But if every syllable of the half line is carefully pronounced and after each half line a quiet breath is taken, it may have some effect on heart rate."

This makes sense, Haas said. "Without sounding too mystical, the body is very interconnected," he said. "In our society, for example, you have parade music, marching music. When natives in South America row a boat, they'll often chant. All of these are essentially techniques that synchronize function."

Cysarz cautioned, however, that reading is not a cure-all for heart patients. "They need advice from physicians and therapists to get over their disease," he said. "This fact is not replaced by reading poetry."

### More information

To learn more about dactylic hexameter, try [Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com).

(SOURCES: Francois Haas, Ph.D., director, cardiopulmonary rehabilitation research, New York University School of Medicine, New York City; Dirk Cysarz, Ph.D., chairman, medical theory and complementary medicine, University of Witten, Herdecke, Germany; April 8, 2004, online edition, *American Journal of Physiology -- Heart and Circulatory Physiology*)

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