

American Cancer Society On Tai Chi

Other Common Name(s)

T'ai Chi, Tai Chi Chuan, Tai Chi Chih, Tai Ji Juan, Tai Ji Quan, Tai Ji, Shadow Boxing

Scientific/Medical Name(s)

None

Description

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese form of martial arts. It is a mind-body, self-healing system that uses movement, meditation, and breathing to improve health and well being.

Overview

Research has shown tai chi is useful as a form of exercise that may improve posture, balance, muscle mass and tone, flexibility, stamina, and strength in older adults. Tai chi is also recognized as a method to reduce stress that can provide the same cardiovascular benefits as moderate exercise, such as lowered heart rate and blood pressure.

How is it Promoted For Use?

People who practice the deep breathing and physical movements of tai chi report it makes them feel more relaxed, younger, agile, and helps their circulation. Its slow, graceful movements, accompanied by rhythmic breathing, relax the body as well as the mind. Research has found that tai chi can reduce stress, lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease. See Qigong and Yoga for other Eastern methods of exercise. There is also evidence that tai chi is particularly suited for older adults, or for others who are not physically strong or healthy. Proponents claim tai chi balances the flow of vital energy or life force called qi (or chi), which serves to prevent illness, improve general health, and extend life. It is also based on the theory of yin and yang (interaction of opposite forces). Practitioners claim tai chi is designed to balance yin and yang forces to achieve inner harmony.

What Does it Involve?

Tai chi students begin by learning a series of gentle, deliberate movements called forms. Each form contains between 20 to 100 moves, and requires up to 20 minutes to complete. Each form derives its name from nature, for example, "Wave Hands Like Clouds," or "Grasping the Bird's Tail." In order to balance the yin and yang, the movements are practiced in pairs of opposites. For example, a turn to the right follows one to the left. While performing these exercises, the individual is urged to pay close attention to his or her breathing, which is centered in the diaphragm. Tai chi relies entirely on technique rather than strength or power. Meditative concentration is focused on a point just below the navel, from which it is believed qi radiates throughout the body. Tai chi is taught in many health clubs, schools, and recreational facilities. Practitioners believe that daily practice is necessary in order to get the most benefit. Once an individual has mastered a form, it can be practiced at home.

What is the History Behind it?

Tai chi is based on the philosophy of Taoism, a Chinese belief system first developed in the 6th century BC that also includes qigong and acupuncture (see Qigong and Acupuncture). Taoism includes beliefs in the existence of qi and the yin and yang. Tai chi originated as a martial art and has been practiced as an exercise in China for many centuries. Tai chi became a sports event in the 1990 XI Asian Games. Tai chi has recently gained popularity in the United States and other Western countries as a general exercise technique, especially for older adults. Today, there are classes, videotapes, and books available on Tai chi.

What is the Evidence?

Researchers have focused on studying the benefits of relaxation and exercise that result from practicing Tai chi. Clinical trials found that Tai chi improves posture, balance, flexibility, muscle mass and tone, stamina, and strength in older adults and may help prevent falls and fractures. One randomized clinical trial found that tai chi lead to a sense of improvement in overall well being in older adults and increased motivation to continue exercising. As an exercise, the benefits have also been noted for older individuals with chronic diseases such as arthritis, osteoporosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and peripheral artery disease. Research has found that Tai chi can reduce stress and provide the same cardiovascular benefits as moderate exercise, such as reduced heart rate and blood pressure. There is no scientific evidence that tai chi cures cancer or any other disease, however, it may be useful as a complementary therapy to conventional treatment.

Are There Any Possible Problems or Complications?

Tai chi is considered to be a relatively safe, moderate physical activity. As with any form of exercise, it is important to be aware of physical limitations. People with cancer and chronic conditions such as arthritis and heart disease should consult with their physician before undergoing any type of therapy that involves manipulation of joints and muscles.