

T'ai Chi Helps Prevent Falls and Could Improve Your Mental Health

It is an ancient Chinese martial art that promotes harmony between the mind and body. But the carefully controlled movements of t'ai chi are also good for the health and well-being of elderly people, according to a review published online May 16, 2011 in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

"The review supports what many geriatricians believe," says geriatric specialist Patricia Bloom, MD, the Director of Integrative Health for the Martha Stewart Center for Living/Coffey Geriatrics Practice at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "We have taught that t'ai chi is an effective intervention for older adults, and this meta-analysis supports that."

The evidence

Researchers looked at 35 studies of t'ai chi and critically evaluated the data to determine common benefits of t'ai chi for elderly patients. They concluded that there is clear evi-

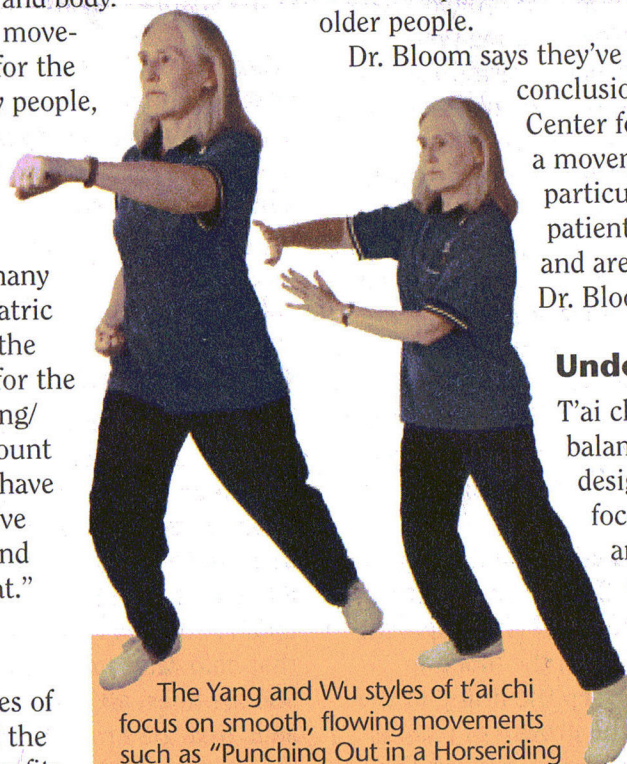
dence that t'ai chi is effective for fall prevention and for the improvement of psychological health among older people.

Dr. Bloom says they've already come to a similar conclusion at the Martha Stewart Center for Living. "We offer t'ai chi as a movement intervention, and have particularly recommended it for patients who have balance problems and are at risk of falling," explains Dr. Bloom.

Understanding t'ai chi

T'ai chi is helpful to people with balance problems because it is, by design, a physical art form that focuses on movement and balance. It originated in ancient China as a means of self-defense. Over time people began to use it for health purposes.

At the Martha Stewart Center for Living, patients are led by an instructor through a series of gentle



The Yang and Wu styles of t'ai chi focus on smooth, flowing movements such as "Punching Out in a Horseriding Stance" (left), and "Grasp the Bird's Tail" (right), and are especially suitable for older adults.

What You Should Know

The benefits of t'ai chi include:

- Improvements in balance and coordination.
- An increase in muscle strength.
- Better focus and concentration.
- Opportunities for social interaction.
- Stress reduction.
- Lower blood pressure.

flowing movements that are done with awareness and special breathing techniques. "The sequence and number of movements depends on the particular style, such as the Yang, Wu, or Tai Chi Chih styles," explains Dr. Bloom. "Each style emphasizes different aspects of balance and movement. Yang style involves constantly flexed knees, a wide stance width, and slow steady movement, which is particularly beneficial for strengthening leg muscles. Wu style, with its higher stances and slower pace, may be particularly effective for improving balance."

All of the styles include slow, graceful movements that flow from one to the next so that the body is in constant motion, with your posture a key focus.

By balancing the body, t'ai chi also aims to balance the mind, and the review concluded that t'ai chi does improve mental well-being. Dr. Bloom says that may be due to the focused nature of the exercises. "The slow, meditative quality of t'ai chi and its close cousin, qi gong, suggest that very likely it leads to 'up-regulation' of the parasympathetic nervous system and reduction in sympathetic 'fight or flight' response,

including reduction in blood pressure," she explains. "However, better studies are needed in order to document that."

Reactions from Mount Sinai patients, while not an actual clinical study of the exercises, may also indicate the effectiveness of t'ai chi. "Our participants love it, and tell us that it has improved their quality of life," says Dr. Bloom, "but we do not have definitive data to that effect."

Globally, t'ai chi is recognized as a form of relaxation to combat stress. T'ai chi classes are offered everywhere from health clubs to community centers to hospitals. It's so useful that the American Geriatrics Society has also added it as a movement intervention option in its prevention of falls guidelines.

How to start

Dr. Bloom says anyone with an interest in pursuing a movement/exercise option to improve gait and balance is a candidate for t'ai chi. "For frail older adults, however, the class must be taught by someone who is experienced in working with older adults," says Dr. Bloom. For example, the instructor at the Martha Stewart Center for Living teaches his classes with participants in chairs, which makes the classes appropriate even for participants who are unable to stand for an hour.

Speak with your doctor before beginning a t'ai chi regimen—and keep in mind that it isn't recommended for people with joint problems, back pain, fractures or severe osteoporosis.

Reprinted with permission from
Women's Nutrition Connection