
Tai Chi: Balance in Motion

This ancient alternative medicine may offer many health benefits, including improved coordination and more restful sleep.

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When you think of martial arts, images of experts breaking boards or perhaps Chuck Norris teaching bad guys a lesson may come to mind.

But an alternative medicine practice called tai chi — which has roots in a centuries-old Chinese martial art — is experiencing a new wave of popularity. Instead of promoting the practice as a type of self-defense, Eastern practitioners promote tai chi as a way of bringing balance to your body, and Western medical researchers are busy exploring how this form of alternative medicine may help prevent and treat illnesses and injuries.

What Is Tai Chi?

According to legend, Chinese monks began practicing tai chi both to increase their ability to hold meditative poses and protect their monasteries from invaders. While performing tai chi, the participant smoothly proceeds through a flow of movements that are said to mimic the motions of animals such as the tiger and crane.

From the Chinese medicine standpoint, a vital energy called "qi" should constantly be circulating through your body. However, it can become blocked and stagnant, which disrupts your health — practicing tai chi is said to improve the flow of the qi energy.

Principles that are emphasized in the practice of this alternative medicine include:

Balance. You maintain good body alignment while moving from foot to foot.

Relaxation. You concentrate on your movement while keeping your mind calm and clear.

Coordination. You learn to move your body through complex motions while maintaining good posture.

This form of alternative medicine is growing in popularity. According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), a recent survey revealed that an estimated 2.3 million adults had practiced tai chi in the previous year.

How Tai Chi Could Improve Your Health

In recent years, researchers have explored the possible effects of tai chi on a number of conditions and found that this alternative medicine may be beneficial for these problems:

Falls. Preventing falls in the elderly community is a major focus of interest in tai chi. In one recent study, researchers reviewed studies on how to prevent falls among older people and found that tai chi was effective in reducing the rate of falls for this age group.

Sleep disorders. A study in older people found that practicing tai chi for six months compared with low-impact exercise was associated with better sleep and less daytime sleepiness.

Stroke. A recent study explored why tai chi might be a helpful alternative medicine for people who have had strokes. The practice is associated with improved balance, lower blood pressure, and elevated mood — all of which were beneficial for people who have survived strokes.

Knee pain. In another study, one group of older people with osteoarthritis of the knee performed tai chi regularly for 12 weeks, while another group with the same condition did not. Those participating in this alternative medicine reported decreased pain and improvements in physical function and stiffness.

NCCAM recommends that you discuss tai chi with your doctor before participating if you have a medical condition or you haven't exercised in a while. In addition, you might experience muscle soreness when you start or if you perform movements too vigorously.

Because the movements are slow and controlled — focusing on simple poise instead of strength — tai chi makes a helpful meditative activity for any age group.



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