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Tai chi exercises may help what ails you

Q. I'm getting older and need to find a new way to keep fit. I've heard that tai chi might be a good option. Can you tell me more about it and its health benefits?



Ask Doctor K

A. Tai chi is often described as "meditation in motion." I think it could just as well be called medication in motion. This mind-body practice appears to help treat or prevent many health problems.

Tai chi is a low-impact, slow-motion exercise. As you practice it, you move fluidly through a series of motions. The motions are named for animal actions such as "white crane spreads its wings," or for martial arts moves.

As you move, you breathe deeply and naturally, focusing your attention on your bodily sensations.

A tai chi session usually starts with a warm-up to help you loosen your muscles and joints and focus on your breath and body. Then you proceed to tai chi forms. Forms are sets of movements.

A tai chi session also usually includes "qigong" — "breath work" or "energy work." Qigong consists of gentle breathing sometimes combined with movement. The idea is to help relax the mind and mobilize the body's energy.

Tai chi can be easily adapted for anyone, whether you are fit, confined to a wheelchair or recovering from surgery. It addresses the key components of fitness: muscle strength, flexibility, balance and, to a lesser degree, aerobic conditioning.

Combined with standard treatment, tai chi may also be helpful for several medical conditions. For example, tai chi has been shown to help:

- Improve mood and

physical function in people with severe knee osteoarthritis

- Improve flexibility and slow the progression of ankylosing spondylitis, a painful and debilitating inflammatory form of arthritis

- Reduce the pain of fibromyalgia

- Maintain bone health in postmenopausal women

- Improve quality of life and the ability to perform normal daily activities in women suffering from breast cancer or the side effects of breast cancer treatment

- Significantly improve risk factors for heart disease

- Lower blood pressure

- Improve sleep quality and duration

- Improve balance in stroke patients.

I don't know how many people in the West practice tai chi, as I don't see a lot of people practicing it in public places. On a trip to China two years ago, I took a brisk morning walk around a pond near the hotel. There were a few other walkers and joggers — but there were hundreds of people doing tai chi.

On returning to the hotel, I asked the front desk staff how many of them practiced tai chi. They gave me a curious look. "All of us," said one. Their parents, their grandparents, their great-grandparents — almost all of them practiced tai chi, they said. It was a part of life.

We have to take seriously any practice that has persisted for centuries among millions of people.

- *Dr. Komaroff is a physician and professor at Harvard Medical School. Go to his website to send questions and get additional information: AskDoctorK.com.*