

TAI CHI THERAPY

Parkinson's disease patients find benefits in martial arts exercise

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Many people have seen martial arts performed in movies and on television, most likely as a means of defense against opposing forces in battle scenes. However, in Winter Haven, a form of martial arts - tai chi - is being used as a means of defense against an internal opponent - Parkinson's disease.



George Aycrigg / News Chief

Laura Williams, left, and Bob Harmon, right, follow the instructor Michael Carey during Tai Chi classes. Tuesday, August 17, 2010.

Funded as part of a grant by the University of South Florida neurology department, Dr. Michael Carey has been offering free tai chi classes in Lakeland to Parkinson's disease patients for two years. This summer, he started offering the classes in Winter Haven.

Parkinson's disease patient Laura Williams began taking the classes in Lakeland and switched to the Winter Haven classes when they became available.

"I knew what tai chi was, but I didn't know how it could help people with Parkinson's disease," said Williams of her decision to start the class two years ago. "I heard about the class through my doctor, and I decided to go. It has helped so much with my balance, because my balance wasn't that good because of Parkinson's. The class has been good for that."

Williams said that because of tai chi's slow, deliberate movements, the exercise is one she can practice at home to supplement the once-a-week class.

"We're supposed to practice our movements at home each week," she said. "It's not an easy exercise, because there are a lot of movements to remember, It's easier when we're in class seeing someone else doing it. But it's very rewarding - I'd recommend it to others with Parkinson's, It's the best exercise, a calm exercise. We aren't doing something hard like jumping jacks."

For Parkinson's patients, staying active in a non-strenuous way is ideal, Carey said.

"The National Parkinson's Foundation recently acknowledged the benefits of tai chi for people with the disease," he said. "I had been teaching tai chi in Polk County for several years, and three years ago, I decided to partner with USF to offer classes for Parkinson's disease patients."

The National Parkinson's Foundation website gives several benefits Parkinson's patients can receive from practicing tai chi.

According to the site, tai chi promotes conscious awareness of movement and actions (beneficial since automatic motions are affected by Parkinson's). It increases awareness of proper body alignment and posture. Tai chi improves balance with reduced fall risk (supported by numerous studies) and enhances flexibility.

Additionally, tai chi affords Parkinson's patients a greater sense of well-being. It offers relaxation, which can help to lessen Parkinson's symptoms (tremor, rigidity) or manage medication side effects.

Tai chi also improves breath support and control. It helps to build healthy bones through weight-bearing activities (important in fighting osteoporosis) and it increases strength, especially in core muscles (abdominals, hips and back).

"USF's neurology department does research on Parkinson's disease, working toward finding ways to lessen the disease's symptoms," Carey said. "It has found that tai chi is beneficial toward lessening some of the problems associated with this movement disorder."

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, a part of the National Institute of Health, includes tai chi as a complementary therapy for Parkinson's disease patients. Other complementary therapies include massage therapy, yoga, hypnosis and acupuncture.

According to the NIH website, Parkinson's disease belongs to a group of conditions called movement disorders. The four main symptoms are tremor, or trembling in hands, arms, legs, jaw or head; rigidity, or stiffness of the limbs and trunk; bradykinesia, or slowness of movement; and postural instability, or impaired balance. These symptoms usually begin gradually and worsen with time. As they become more pronounced, patients may have difficulty walking, talking, or completing other simple tasks. Not everyone with one or more of these symptoms has Parkinson's disease, as the symptoms sometimes appear in other diseases as well.

Parkinson's disease is both chronic, persisting over a long period of time, and progressive, with its symptoms growing worse over time. It is not contagious. Although some Parkinson's disease cases appear to be hereditary, and a few can be traced to specific genetic mutations, most cases are sporadic - that is, the disease does not seem to run in families. Many researchers now believe that Parkinson's disease results from a combination of genetic susceptibility and exposure to one or more environmental factors that trigger the disease.

About 50,000 Americans are diagnosed with Parkinson's disease each year, but getting an accurate count of the number of cases may be impossible because many people in the early stages of the disease assume their symptoms are the result of normal aging and do not seek help from a physician. Also, diagnosis is sometimes difficult and uncertain because other conditions may produce symptoms of Parkinson's disease, and there is no definitive test for the disease, according to the NIH website.

While there is no cure for Parkinson's disease, Carey said for its sufferers, finding ways to lessen the impact of symptoms is key. He believes the ancient practice of tai chi is one of the ideal ways to manage symptoms.

"Tai chi is an ancient form of Chinese martial arts that has been modified in the last century as a health exercise," Carey said. "Tai chi was a secretive form of martial arts until the Yang family in China brought it public. They believed that the health benefits of the practice outweighed the risk of everyone knowing it."

In addition to tai chi being beneficial to people with Parkinson's disease, it also helps the symptoms of other disorders, such as arthritis.

"The NIH suggests tai chi may boost the immune system, improve mood and its slow, mindful movements may improve balance - an ideal for Parkinson's patients," Carey said. "The Cleveland Clinic says that exercise is the single most important thing a person can do to stay healthy and delay the aging process."

About exercise and Parkinson's disease, the Cleveland Clinic website said, "Exercise benefits both the physical and psychological well-being of people with Parkinson's disease. Because Parkinson's disease affects a person's ability to move, exercise helps to keep muscles strong and to improve flexibility and mobility."

"Exercise does not stop the disease from progressing; however, it improves balance, helping people overcome gait problems and strengthen the muscles that aid in swallowing and speaking."

"Also, exercise can prevent some of the secondary long-term complications of Parkinson's disease such as stiffening of the joints. Patients also receive the emotional satisfaction of feeling they have accomplished something."

Carey said the Mayo Clinic also supports the benefits of tai chi.

"Mayo Clinic suggests that tai chi can help lower blood pressure, benefit people with diabetes, depression, anxiety, insomnia, balance problems, osteoporosis, help manage weight and keep joint flexibility," he said. "Putting all this research together, tai chi is an ideal form of exercise for Parkinson's patients because they have balance problems, they can be depressed, have anxiety and have joint problems."

In a typical tai chi class, students will learn groups of movements, that are assembled into an 8-minute routine.

"My students are encouraged to learn the movements and then go home and practice them," Carey said. "When all the movements are put together, the routine will be 8 minutes long. If they do this routine twice daily, they will have between 15 and 30 minutes of focused exercise. This is ideal for Parkinson's patients."

Carey said that if the routines are practiced regularly, patients will begin to see benefits.

"One of the easiest results to measure in Parkinson's patients is a reduction in falls and hip fractures," he said. "Clinics have noticed that when Parkinson's patients and seniors practice tai chi, they seem to have fewer falls and serious injuries."

Tai chi is ideal for Parkinson's patients because the movements are slow - not a rigorous form of exercise - like Williams said.

"Dr. Carey is very good and very patient," she said. "He will go over a movement 100 times to make sure we get it."

Patience is key when teaching Parkinson's patients tai chi, Carey said.

"People with movement disorders have trouble with quick movements because they suffer from tremors," he said. "We go through everything slowly so they can learn it and not get frustrated."

Carey said that in the three years he has been teaching tai chi to Parkinson's patients, he has received positive feedback and has the support of local doctors.

"Most people enjoy tai chi because it's movements are slow, peaceful and easy to do," he said. "What is hard is memorizing the routine to practice at home. The intention is to internalize the routine and incorporate into the pattern of activities at home."

Carey's tai chi class for Parkinson's disease patients is offered from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Tuesdays at Main Street Dojo's Inc., at 126 W. Central Ave., Winter Haven.

According to the Cleveland Clinic website, all Parkinson's patients should check with a doctor before beginning any exercise program. A doctor might make recommendations about the types of exercise best suited to symptoms and those that should be avoided, the intensity of the workout, the duration of the workout and any physical limitations and referrals to other professionals, such as a physical therapist, who can help create a personal exercise program.

For details about Carey's tai chi program for Parkinson's patients, call 863-295-7900.

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