WHAT IS TAI CHI?

The complete name of Tai Chi is, “Tai Chi Chuan.” It translates as, “Supreme Ultimate Fist.” (Dictionary.com)

“Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art and form of stylized, meditative exercise, characterized by methodically slow circular and stretching movement and positions of bodily balance.” (Dictionary.com)

Tai Chi is sometimes called moving meditation because of its flowing movement. (Tai Chi Instructor Norm Gill)

Tai Chi is the body singing. (Tai Chi Instructor Norm Gill)

Benefits include:

- Stress relief
- Increased flexibility, agility, and suppleness
- Improved respiratory endurance and circulatory efficiency
- Increased balance, posture, and presentation of self
- Increased coordination and strength
- A feeling of well-being and confidence

(Tai Chi Instructor Norm Gill)

Tai Chi is the universal Yin-Yang symbol and the interactions therein. (Tai Chi Instructor Louis Knox)
Exercise for Your Mind

Design a workout that can build your brainpower as well as your muscles.

You have many good reasons to become more physically active: It can boost mood, help maintain a healthy weight, and keep muscles strong. Now, a growing body of evidence suggests workouts may have brain benefits as well.

Much of the research on brain health and exercise is focused on aerobics. Yet a recent analysis from the University of Canberra in Australia found that certain nonaerobic activities can also help improve brain function in people over 50, even after early signs of cognitive decline.

And a 2015 study found that older women who had stronger, more powerful legs retained more of their brains' grey matter. This could be a sign of more robust cognition in later life.

We reviewed the most recent research to find tips on optimizing your exercise routine to help keep your brain healthy and your mind sharp.

Take a Brisk Walk
If you don’t exercise now, it’s easy to start: Just walk out your door, and keep going.

It’s fine to start small. "Build up from 10 minutes walking a day" until you get to at least 30, says Elissa Burton, Ph.D., a research fellow in the school of physiotherapy and exercise science at Curtin University in Australia.

And if you can, pick up your pace: Getting your heart rate up will maximize the cognitive benefits, according to Helen Macpherson, Ph.D., a dementia research fellow at Deakin University in Australia. That means you should be exercising at an intensity where you start to find it hard to have a conversation.

Do More Than the Minimum
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all older adults get 150 minutes of this sort of moderately intense aerobic exercise each week, which would be five 30-minute workouts. But the biggest boost in brainpower in the Canberra study was linked to exercise sessions of 45 to 60 minutes.

So try consolidating some workouts into a longer session. Or gradually work up to 45 to 60 minutes five days per week.

Try Tai Chi
This Chinese martial art—which consists of slow, rhythmic movements—was one of several types of exercise tied to improved cognitive functioning in the recent Canberra study. Plus, it’s low impact, which can be good for people who haven’t been active in a while, says study author Joseph Northey, a Ph.D. candidate in sport and exercise science at the University of Canberra. It’s also easy on your joints.

To learn the proper technique, it’s best to seek out a local class, Northey says. You can find instructors near you who are certified by the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association at americantaichi.net/TaiChiQigongClass.asp.

Resistance Training Can Help, Too

Resistance training, exercise that causes muscles to contract, is meant to strengthen, but it may also help protect against cognitive decline. And you don’t need weights or equipment, says Joseph Northey, an exercise science researcher at the University of Canberra. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends resistance training at least twice per week. Here are three tips to get you started:

1. Stand up, sit down, repeat.
   As long as you’re steady on your feet, try standing up from a chair without using your hands. Do this in sets of five or more anytime you find yourself sitting around the house.

2. Make daily tasks harder.
   Choose stairs over elevators and escalators. You’ll get an aerobic workout and build muscle at the same time.

3. Join a class.
   Northey’s recent study found that group programs incorporating both resistance and aerobic training were beneficial for your brain. Check out the offerings at your local YMCA or senior center for a class, and remember to talk with your doctor before you start any new exercise program.
HEALTH BENEFITS OF TAI CHI AND QI GONG

A Comprehensive Review of Health Benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi

Story at-a-glance -

- Tai Chi, a branch of Qigong, has been practiced for over 2,000 years. Frequently described as meditation in motion, the activity takes you through a set of slow, gentle movements while you focus on your breath.

  Tai Chi and/or Qigong may be particularly beneficial for the elderly and those struggling with chronic pain conditions, thanks to its low impact. You can even do Tai Chi if you’re confined to a wheelchair.

- Some of the strongest evidence supports Qigong for conditions relating to pain and fatigue, lung and cardiovascular function, balance and coordination, stress and anxiety, and general immune function.

By Dr. Mercola
Tai Chi, a branch of Qigong, has been practiced for over 2,000 years. Qigong has an even longer history, dating back about 5,000 years. Originating in China, these exercises are said to balance and harness qi (also spelled chi), or "life energy," and is frequently described as meditation in motion, as the activity takes you through a set of slow, gentle movements while you focus on your breath. Just looking at it, it may seem like these exercises do little in terms of exercising your body, but appearances can be deceptive.

Research shows Tai Chi and Qigong provide many physical and psychological benefits. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), it helps channel qi through your body's energy meridians, thereby improving your overall health and well-being. More specifically, studies have shown Tai Chi stimulates the central nervous system, lowers blood pressure, relieves stress, tones muscles and helps with digestion and waste elimination.

Tai Chi may be particularly beneficial for the elderly, thanks to its low impact. You can even do Tai Chi if you're confined to a wheelchair. Those struggling with chronic pain or stiffness may also benefit a great deal. More often than not, one of the worst things you can do when you're in pain is to stay inactive, as this merely weakens your muscles further, increasing rather than lessening your pain and stiffness.

Tai Chi can also take the place of seated meditation if you struggle with the sitting still part. While practicing Tai Chi, your mind is meant to stay focused on your movements, relaxation and deep breathing, while distracting thoughts are ignored.

Medicinal Movements That Are Easy and Enjoyable to Practice

Qigong can be viewed as a medicinal movement practice, combining breath work, relaxation, movement and self-massage all in one. Many who try it for the first time will be struck by how invigorating Tai Chi can be. As scientific interest in this ancient system has grown over the years, a solid foundation of research has been laid, supporting its use for a variety of health conditions.
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PubMed now lists well over 500 published articles on Qigong alone. In 2010, a comprehensive review of health benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi was published, reviewing the psychological and physiological outcomes of both branches of practice. In all, 77 randomized controlled trials (RCT) on Tai Chi and/or Qigong published between 1993 and 2007 were included in the review, which noted the many similarities between the two practices:

"These two forms of meditative movement, Qigong and Tai Chi, are close relatives having shared theoretical roots, common operational components and similar links to the wellness and health promoting aspects of traditional Chinese medicine. They are nearly identical in practical application in the health enhancement context and share much overlap in what traditional Chinese medicine describes as the 'three regulations': body focus (posture and movement), breath focus and mind focus (meditative components). Due to the similarity of Qigong and Tai Chi, this review of the state of the science for these forms of meditative movement will investigate the benefits of both forms together."

Potent Self-Care


Undoubtedly, part of the benefit comes from its mind-body influence, including its focus on meditation. Even respected conventional health institutions such as the Mayo Clinic and Harvard Medical School recommend Tai Chi for its health benefits, especially as a stress-reduction tool. This should come as no surprise considering the many ill effects stress has on your body.

Health Benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi

So, what exactly can Tai Chi and Qigong do for your health? According to the scientific evidence, conditions that may benefit from either of these practices include but is not limited to:

- Immune system
- Cardiovascular disease
- Gout
- Arthritic disease
- Stroke and brain injury rehabilitation
- Aerobic capacity, strength and coordination
- Falls and balance disorders
- Bone mineral density
- Shingles-related immunity
- Pain and stiffness
- Sleep disturbances
- Stress, pain and anxiety

WorldTaiChiDay.org has a medical research library listing nearly 100 health issues for which Tai Chi may be helpful, so this is far from a comprehensive list. That said, some of the strongest evidence seems to support Qigong for conditions relating to pain and fatigue, lung and cardiovascular function, balance and coordination, stress and anxiety, and general immune function.

For example, in one study, older women who performed Tai Chi exercises for 12 weeks noticed great improvements in their arthritic symptoms, balance and physical functioning. Other studies
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have shown Tai Chi can help preserve range of motion in patients with rheumatoid arthritis, thereby reducing disability.

Patients struggling with also report less pain, fatigue and depression, along with improved physical functioning and sleep after four months of Tai Chi. A 1999 study looking into the effects of Qigong on pain confirmed that, whatever the mechanism, this type of gentle exercise does have a marked effect. Here, patients aged 18 to 65 suffering with complex regional pain syndrome type I received either Qigong instruction and qi emission by a Qigong master, or a similar set of instructions by a sham master.

In the genuine Qigong group, 82 percent reported reduced pain at the end of the first session compared to 45 percent of controls. By the last session, 91 percent of the genuine Qigong group reported reduced pain, compared to just 36 percent in the control group. Anxiety reduction was also greater in the Qigong group.

Patients With Chronic Illness Benefit From Tai Chi

More recently, a systematic review published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2015 looked at Tai Chi's effect on four chronic health conditions:

- Cancer
- Osteoarthritis
- Heart failure (HF)
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

After reviewing the data from 33 studies, the researchers concluded Tai Chi provided at least some benefit for all of these conditions. All saw improvements in strength, balance and posture, for example, without adverse side effects such as increased pain or breathlessness. In those with arthritis, it helped reduce arthritic-specific symptoms like pain and stiffness. Most of the studies involved doing one-hour Tai Chi sessions two or three times a week for about 12 weeks. According to the authors, "The results demonstrated a favorable effect or tendency of Tai Chi to improve physical performance and showed that this type of exercise could be performed by individuals with different chronic conditions, including COPD, HF and OA."

Qigong Helps Boost Immune Function and Lowers Inflammation

Another interesting study demonstrated that a modified short form of Tai Chi called Tai Chi Chih helped boost immune system response to the shingles virus, thereby preventing outbreaks. Indeed, a number of studies in the 2010 review found improvements in immune-related blood markers, such as leukocytes, eosinophils and monocytes, suggesting this kind of mind-body practice has a direct effect on your immune function.

Inflammation is also closely related to immune function, and studies confirm Qigong and Tai Chi help reduce inflammatory markers as well, including C-reactive protein and interleukin-6. According to the 2010 review:

"A number of studies not utilizing an RCT design have examined blood markers prior to and after Tai Chi or Qigong interventions, providing some indication of factors that might be important to explore in future RCTs ... For example, improvements in thyroid-stimulating hormone, follicle-stimulating hormone, triiodothyronine, and lymphocyte production have been noted in response to Tai Chi compared to matched controls."
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Pre-post Tai Chi intervention designs have also shown an improvement in immunoglobulin G (IgG) and natural killer (NK) cells and similar non-RCTs have suggested that Qigong improves immune function and reduces inflammation profiles as indicated by cytokine and T-lymphocyte subset proportions ... These immune and inflammation related parameters fairly consistently respond to Tai Chi and Qigong, while also providing potential for examining mechanisms of action."

The Psychological Effects of Qigong and Tai Chi

Twenty-seven of the 77 studies included in the featured 2010 review reported psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, stress, mood, fear of falling and self-esteem. While most of these studies did not include psychological distress as a recruitment parameter, the findings were substantial nonetheless. For example, compared to regular exercise, Qigong was found to have a more pronounced benefit on participants' anxiety levels. Depression also improved significantly compared to inactive controls. Tai Chi even outperformed standard psychosocial support interventions. According to the authors:

"This category of symptoms, particularly anxiety and depression, shows fairly consistent responses to both Tai Chi and Qigong, especially when the control intervention does not include active interventions such as exercise.

In particular, with a few studies indicating that there may be changes in biomarkers associated with anxiety and/or depression in response to the interventions, this category shows promise for examining potential mechanisms of action for the change in psychological state."

Give Qigong or Tai Chi a Try

Qigong and Tai Chi are two examples of gentle, restorative exercises that help tone and strengthen your body, increase circulation and oxygen flow, and improve flexibility and balance. As noted in the 2010 review:

"A compelling body of research emerges when Tai Chi studies and the growing body of Qigong studies are combined. The evidence suggests that a wide range of health benefits accrue in response to these meditative movement forms, some consistently so, and some with limitations in the findings thus far.

This review has identified numerous outcomes with varying levels of evidence for the efficacy for Qigong and Tai Chi, including bone health, cardiopulmonary fitness and related biomarkers, physical function, falls prevention and balance, general quality of life and patient reported outcomes, immunity and psychological factors such as anxiety, depression and self-efficacy.

A substantial number RCTs have demonstrated consistent, positive results especially when the studies are designed with limited activity for controls. When both Tai Chi and Qigong are investigated together, as two approaches to a single category of practice, meditative movement, the magnitude of the body of research is quite impressive."

Indeed, researchers have suggested that doctors may someday prescribe Tai Chi to elderly patients suffering with multiple chronic diseases. But why wait? You can learn Tai Chi at home from books or DVDs, but joining a class with an experienced instructor will ensure you’re doing the movements correctly and safely. Many areas now offer courses in Tai Chi, so check with your local health club or yoga studio.