



TAI CHI & YOUR HEALTH

A Modern Take on an Ancient Practice

You may have seen the flowing postures and gentle movements of tai chi and wondered what it's all about. Tai chi is an ancient mind and body practice. While more research is needed, studies suggest that it may have many health benefits.

Tai chi is sometimes referred to as “moving meditation.” There are many types of tai chi. They typically combine slow movements with breathing patterns and mental focus and relaxation. Movements may be done while walking, standing, or sitting.

“At its root, tai chi is about treating the whole person and enhancing the balance and crosstalk between the body’s systems,” says Dr. Peter

Wayne, a longtime tai chi researcher at Harvard Medical School. “It’s a promising intervention for preserving and improving many areas of health, especially in older adults.”

Several studies have found evidence that tai chi can increase balance and stability in older people and reduce the risk and fear of falls. Each year, more than 1 in 4 older adults falls, and 1 out of 5 of these falls causes a serious injury such as broken bones or a head injury.

“Trying to be careful can make you more prone to falls,” Wayne says.

“Tai chi may help you move more confidently and safely again.” Some NIH-funded research suggests that tai chi may also improve balance and

prevent falls in people with mild-to-moderate Parkinson’s disease.

Research suggests that practicing tai chi might help improve posture and confidence, how you think and manage emotions, and your quality of life. Studies have found that it may help people with fibromyalgia sleep better and cope with pain, fatigue, and depression. Regular practice may also improve quality of life and mood in people with chronic heart failure or cancer. Older adults may find that tai chi can help improve sleep quality and protect learning, memory, and other mental functions.

Further study will be needed to fully evaluate and confirm the potential benefits of tai chi. But since the



practice involves moving slowly and mindfully, there's little chance of harm when done correctly.

“Whether you're interested in trying tai chi to help with a chronic health issue or the stresses of everyday life, tai chi—if taught properly—can be a great complement to other ways of healthy living and rehabilitation,” Wayne says. “I think we're all looking for tools to help us live productive, long lives with a little more grace and ease.”

There are different styles and ways to practice tai chi, Wayne says. If you're interested in trying it, you can start simply. For instance, try standing behind and holding onto a sturdy chair for support, then mindfully rock back and forth to build awareness of all the parts of your body and their connections. Eventually, you might move on to practice more complex movements or sequences.

IS TAI CHI RIGHT FOR ME

- » Talk with your health care provider about your physical activity and limits. Ask whether tai chi might be a good option for you.
- » Look for classes based on your age and health. Some classes may be geared toward college students and stress management; others may be designed for folks over age 60 with particular medical conditions.
- » Observe several teachers and classes to find a fit for you. There are different teaching styles, levels, and ways to practice tai chi.
- » Don't be discouraged if you can't do all the movements. Think about the potential health benefits, and try to be patient with yourself. Everyone has to start somewhere!

