

# Tai chi can heal the body, mind as you age

What is the relationship between the practice of martial arts and health in the elderly? It might be that martial art-based exercise holds the key for maintaining physical fitness even into old age.

I have been a practitioner of martial arts for many years and I remember some of my instructors telling me that the elderly in Asia who practice martial arts are able to stay physically fit and active well into their 80s and 90s. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit China. There, I saw many older people whose daily physical activity regimen would put many 20-year-olds to shame in this country.

Despite my own personal experiences, what is the medical evidence to support the idea that the unique physical movements found in martial arts are beneficial?

There is significant research to demonstrate that tai chi is a powerful tool to enhance balance and strength, improve arthritis and prevent falls in the elderly. Over the years, there have been dozens of studies establishing the benefits of regular tai chi practice.

Tai chi is a form of Chinese martial art that, most commonly, is practiced as a combination of slow, circular movements. Worldwide, it is one of the most popular forms of physical exercise and is used primarily to improve mental and physical health.

A recent study, done through the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the Harvard Medical School, demonstrated that for older women, the regular practice of tai chi is better than brisk walking for overall physical fitness. In the study, one group of women practiced tai chi an hour a day three days a week for three months. Another group spent the same amount of time on tai chi. A third group did not exercise at all.



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*Alternative approach*

Researchers found those who practiced the tai chi had significantly better oxygen utilization, strength, flexibility and balance than the brisk walking and sedentary groups. Those in the tai chi group also had a significant decrease in sympathetic nerve activity and an increase in parasympathetic nerve activity, indicating a greater level of overall stress reduction.

If you examine health research, the most important ingredient for long-term health as well as for treatment of chronic disease is physical activity. It is more important

than stress reduction, diet, sleep or even weight reduction. But what type of exercise is best? That probably depends upon the age and physical fitness of the participants. However, when you look at different types of exercise, martial art-based exercises like tai chi seem to stand out.

Tai chi is excellent for older people because it improves so many different age-related problems, such as balance, arthritis, strength and possibly even osteoporosis. In addition, there is some evidence that the movements enhance the mind-body connection and so might protect against Alzheimer's disease and other dementia.

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Chicago Tribune December 2006