

Gently Improve Your Balance with Tai Chi

Tai chi (pronounced "tie chee") is an ancient Chinese exercise of continuous slow movements. For people who practice regularly, research shows that tai chi appears to improve balance and strength, as well as burn excess calories that can lead to body fat and higher risk for cancer.

TAI CHI IS SO GENTLE that it's hard to believe it is actually a martial art. The names of some of the exercises are poetic: "waving hand in the cloud" or "pushing the mountain." Tai chi's commonality with other Asian martial arts, such as judo and karate, is its calm focus of the mind on breathing correctly while doing the forms, or exercises.

How Tai Chi Works

Deep breathing is an important part of the Chinese art of tai chi. It helps you calm the mind and focus on gentle movements. Good posture and balance are practiced, resulting in stronger muscles.

In one review of seven studies, tai chi reduced the number of falls and blood pressure in 505 elderly people ages 53-96. A study published more recently concluded that moderate practice of tai chi may help reduce frailty and falls by more than 47 percent among 200 participants whose mean age was 76.

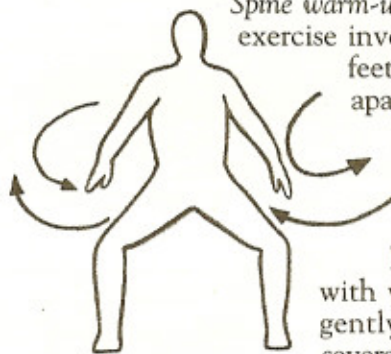
Many different schools and styles of tai chi exist, and most pattern their movements on agility observed in animals. Legend has it that a 15th century monk, Chang San-Feng, watched a fight between a bird and a snake. He observed how the yielding movements of the snake could overcome the stiff attack movements of the bird. The bird was allowed to use up its energy in attacking, which the snake dodged. When the bird was exhausted, the snake fought back and won.

We humans may not be as nimble as animals, but we can still practice tai chi to offset arthritis, improve circulation and muscle strength, and bolster immune function, which can help offset cancer risk.

Here are two simple tai chi exercises:



Leg strengthener. Stand with your feet hip-width apart and knees slightly bent, with arms rounded in front of you as though you were hugging a tree. Keep your back straight and limbs soft while holding this position for as long as you can. At first, you may stand with your back lightly against a wall to keep your balance. Your leg, arm and back muscles are strengthened by performing this exercise for a few minutes each day.



Spine warm-up. A second easy tai chi exercise involves standing with your feet approximately 24 inches apart, and legs slightly bent. Turn from the waist and keep your hip bones facing forward and still. Swing your arms loosely from side to side, with your shoulders and head gently following. Do this for several minutes while breathing deeply and slowly.

Tai chi classes can now be found through county recreation departments, YMCAs, churches, community centers and even through some health maintenance organizations. For more information, consult the web site for the American Tai Chi Association, www.americantaiichi.net, or look in your local library or book store for tai chi videotapes and books.

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