

Mind, Body And Soul - Seniors Connect With The Benefits Of Tai Chi.

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Her arms float up to shoulder height and undulate sideways like ripples on a pond. Sue Clark, age 77, tucks her foot and stands on one leg like a crane, her arms folding to her sides. Silently, she steps forward, her hands pushing an imaginary wave. All the while, a soft smile graces her face. Clark needed a cane to walk into her first tai chi class two years ago. Today, the cane is gone, and Clark is in an intermediate class with about a dozen students, most of whom are senior citizens.

A number of tai chi instructors and fitness directors at Capital Region YMCAs, health clubs and gyms report an increase in older people's interest and participation in tai chi. It is also being taught at senior centers, retirement communities, nursing homes and through adult continuing education programs.

"We're in our third year of offering tai chi classes, which are open to men and women of any age, and we fill every class, mostly with people 50 and over," says Ann Lanoue, the director of Northeast Women's Health Services in Troy, where Clark studies tai chi with instructor Cindy Pizzuco. "We're working to establish more classes because we've had to turn people away."

The ancient Chinese exercise consists of a series of slow movements, called forms, that promote relaxation and a stronger connection of energy between the body, mind and soul, says Pizzuco. The exercise is particularly good for seniors, because it promotes better balance, agility and strength, improves breathing and blood circulation, and even boosts the immune system, according to recent studies, including one supported by the U.S. National Institutes of Health at the University of California in Los Angeles.

"One doesn't need to be in great shape or even in perfect health to begin tai chi. People can advance at their own pace with little risk of injury and start right away to reap the benefits," says Jianye Jiang, of the Capital District Tai Chi and Kung Fu Association who has many students older than 60. "Tai chi isn't scary or competitive," says Lanoue. "Our goal is, 'No pain, no gain.' And I've noticed people always leave the classes smiling." Jiang adds that he's seen people with high blood pressure, asthma, arthritis, and even cancer benefit from tai chi. "Tai chi creates great energy for good health and healing," he says.

Feeling the energy: At a new tai chi class at Fit Express for Women in Guilderland, Sharon Sim, 60, is feeling her "chi" (energy flow) for the first time. "I can't believe the heat going up through my arms," says Sim to Jiang, who is teaching the class. "It's like static electricity. It's like feeling strong and relaxed at the same time."

"That's right," adds Kathleen Fisher, 60. "And (the form) got easier each time we did it. I could balance better. It really feels great."

It was Clark's favorite doctor who recommended tai chi after she suffered a number of falls that resulted in a broken shoulder, ribs and wrists on top of trouble with her knees. "My daughter is a geriatric physician in Philadelphia," says Clark. "She said, 'Mother, part of the problem is your balance. Try tai chi.' And she was right. I move more efficiently and safely."

One in three people over age 65 falls each year, making falls the leading cause of injuries in this age group. And about 25 percent of those who suffer hip injuries die within a year, according to The National Safety Council.

Trunk rotation: One study in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society found that a group of people age 70 and older who did 15 weeks of tai chi reduced their risk of falls by 48 percent. Because tai chi emphasizes trunk rotation, an ability people often lose as they get older, it allows people to shift their weight gradually, and helps them prevent falls. Tai chi helps balance become automatic, says Steven Wolf, the study's lead author and a rehabilitation medicine specialist at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta.

When she first started tai chi, Clark was worried she wouldn't be able to keep up with the class. "But my instructor, Cindy, was very encouraging, and that was key for me and now for both of us," she says with a look to her husband, Marvin Clark, 80. "He saw me doing it at home and wanted to join in."

Marvin Clark says he loves the feel of tai chi. "It's fun and it's calming, not jarring. And I get enough exercise for all the parts of my body," says the retired administrator, who was an accomplished athlete in the past. "I have more energy and it adds a lot of warmth."

Sue Clark says tai chi also makes a big difference in the way she moves through the ordinary activities of her day. "I emphasize proper alignment and posture in tai chi and how to adapt the flow of the movements to daily life dishwashing at the sink, getting in and out of the car, or grocery shopping," says Cindy, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist who became a tai chi instructor in 1995. "Functional exercise, like tai chi, is so important for older people."

The Clarks like tai chi classes, but they also enjoy practicing at home. "There aren't that many things we can do together now. It's a very nice part of tai chi," says Sue Clark. They do tai chi daily in front of a large window that looks out on a maple tree. Sue Clark has discovered the "spirit" of tai chi, it's "like meditation in motion," she says. "And as a result, my outlook on life and the world has improved. I only wish I'd started earlier."