

# Tai chi may be good for heart patients - but that's just for starters

By Marissa Cevallos, HealthKey

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The benefits of tai chi, with origins as a Chinese martial art, seem to be adding up. Evidence that the exercise might help people with heart failure feel less depressed and more energized is but the latest in a string of positive findings about tai chi's health effects.

The light exercise, whose origins go back about 5,000 years, may also improve mood, quality of life and well being in other groups as well.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine offers an introduction to tai chi along with information about its use, research and what to ask potential instructors. It states: "Tai chi incorporates the Chinese concepts of yin and yang (opposing forces within the body) and qi (a vital energy or life force). Practicing tai chi is said to support a healthy balance of yin and yang, thereby aiding the flow of qi."

And the Mayo Clinic touts it as a way to reduce stress, citing its reputation as "meditation in motion."

Most of the research showing the benefits of tai chi comes from small studies. Some of those suggest that the practice can:

**Lessen symptoms of fibromyalgia:** A study by Tufts Medical Center researchers last year found that fibromyalgia patients assigned to one-hour tai chi classes twice a week for 12 weeks reported a larger drop in symptoms than a control group that practiced stretching and wellness education.

**Reduce pain from knee osteoarthritis:** A study of 80 people with knee pain found that those who took a tai chi class twice a week for 12 weeks showed greater improvements in pain, physical function and depression than a control group that did stretching and wellness education. That research also came from Tufts Medical Center.

**Lower blood pressure:** A few studies have reported significant reductions in blood pressure among practitioners, found researchers from the Arizona State University College of Nursing and Healthcare Innovation, while other studies find its effects are comparable to exercise. They analyzed 77 studies on tai chi and qigong, a similar exercise that involves slow movements.

**Improve balance, maybe:** Several studies have found that tai chi may improve balance, even as other studies have found that tai chi practice does not necessarily stop older patients from falling—there's not enough evidence to say what exactly tai chi does for balance, says an analysis by Dutch researchers.

**Bolster quality of life:** Of 17 studies that attempted to measure quality of life, 13 found at least one aspect of quality of life that improved significantly after tai chi interventions.

Actually, the least significant health improvements were in patients suffering from a chronic illness or recovering from cancer, the Arizona State analysis found.

Many people may practice the art for its health benefits, but some forms emphasize competition or self defense, as this short history explains.