

EXERCISE

A Little Tai Chi Can Go A Long Way Against Shingles

Older people who practice tai chi may be better equipped to fight off the virus that causes shingles or, if they do get the disease, may have a milder case of it, researchers say.

Shingles, a painful nerve condition, is caused by the virus that causes chickenpox. The virus, varicella-zoster, can linger in the body for many years after a case of chickenpox and then emerge as shingles. The disease generally affects people older than 50, as their level of antibodies to the virus decreases.

Tai chi, the centuries-old practice from China, is considered a martial art, but it includes aerobic activity, relaxation and meditation. It has been found in the past to strengthen people's immune systems.

In a study paid for by the National Institutes of Health, researchers took 112 volunteers ages 59 to 86 and split them into two groups. One was given 40-minute tai chi lessons three times a week for 16 weeks. The other was given health-counseling classes.

The researchers, led by Dr. Mi-



chael R. Irwin of the University of California, Los Angeles, found that the people who did tai chi improved their immunity to varicella-zoster. They also found that when the volunteers were vaccinated later against the virus, the tai chi practitioners had a better response to the vaccine. The study appears in the current issue of *The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The finding that the exercise significantly raised the volunteers' immunity to the shingles virus suggests that it may also offer help fighting off other viruses, the study said.