

Tai Chi Offers Many Benefits for Older Adults

When most of us think of exercising, we picture ourselves moving fast, like jogging on a treadmill. But an increasingly popular and effective exercise to improve overall health is tai chi, a form of martial arts based on slow, rhythmic movements.

Several of tai chi's fundamental principles — such as relaxation, good posture, and balance — directly address the medical concerns facing many older adults, says former tai chi instructor Robert Schulman, MD, clinical assistant professor of rehabilitative medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College's Center for Complementary and Integrative Medicine.

"Many older people are plagued with tension and with posture problems, and tai chi helps with all of that," he says.

New finding

Two small studies in the March 11 issue of the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* reveal that tai chi may have specific health benefits for people with type 2 diabetes. Researchers found that tai chi may lower blood glucose and blood pressure levels and increase immune system activity.

Such improvements also might be achieved with other types of exercise, says Weill Cornell endocrinologist Carol Levy, MD, but the calming results of tai chi would seem to help, particularly in reducing blood pressure.

Striking a balance

Fear of falling is common among older adults. Tai chi helps improve balance by strengthening the muscles of the hips, improving posture, and evening weight distribution in the legs, Dr. Schulman says.

Dr. Schulman and Florida tai chi instructor

Susan Scheuer, 56, agree that tai chi can be a beneficial part of just about anyone's exercise program, particularly for its ability to help with relaxation.

"When you learn what it means to truly feel relaxed, you can expect to see changes in blood pressure, for example," says Dr. Schulman.

Benefits of Tai Chi

- Improves balance and coordination
- Increases muscle strength
- Provides social interaction
- Reduces stress
- Helps lower blood pressure
- Helps manage pain
- Improves concentration
- Increases confidence

Other advantages

Not only is tai chi healthy, it's also an easy activity to begin. You don't need special equipment or clothing and you can start at any age. Health clubs and community centers around the country offer tai chi instruction.

Scheuer recommends the sun (pronounced "soong") style of tai chi for most older adults, because it focuses on smooth, flowing movements. "The sun style is especially suitable for people with arthritis," Scheuer says.

Dr. Schulman says tai chi training, especially classes aimed at older adults, shouldn't produce joint pain. If such discomfort arises, talk to your doctor and the instructor. Your leg muscles, however, may feel a bit of a strain after class.

"You shouldn't have too much pain in your knees or your back," Dr. Schulman says. "But if your thighs don't hurt a little, you probably aren't doing it right."

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