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Arthritis Health Center



Tai Chi: A Gentle Way to Help Your Joints

By Barbara Brody
WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Michael W. Smith, MD](#)

Maybe your knees twinge, your hips creak, or your shoulders are stiff. There's an excellent chance that tai chi can help.

This meditative martial art -- which features slow, gentle movements and deep breathing -- is a traditional Chinese mind-body practice that traces its roots back thousands of years.

In addition to its ancient origins, there's modern-day evidence that it can help you stay healthy, especially when it comes to caring for your joints.

What Is Tai Chi?

"It almost looks like a slow-motion dance," says Mary L. Jurisson, MD, a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, who has taught tai chi.

When you do tai chi, you do a series of exercises that flow from one to another, with emphasis on proper posture. "When you watch people doing tai chi, you'll notice that they shift very smoothly and gracefully from one position to another," Jurisson says.

You can take tai chi classes in a group. You don't need a partner for most moves, though tai chi's "push hands practice" involves working in pairs.

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There are many types of tai chi; the Yang style is the most popular. All include circular motions and concentration on breath patterns.

Beginners spend time committing specific moves to memory. Later, students learn to develop flow while improving balance and "energetic connection," says Gene Nelson, a certified master instructor and founder of Empire Tai Chi in Westchester, NY.

Tai chi uses big and small movements, often at the same time. "A single move might require you to step one way and turn your body another while moving your arms in different directions and softly transitioning between legs," Nelson says.

Tai Chi for Your Joints

While the calming, meditative nature of tai chi has long been well-known, it's only recently that the physical perks -- like moving with more ease -- have gained greater recognition. "Today, the vast majority

of people in the U.S. who practice tai chi do it for health reasons, not just intellectual curiosity," Nelson says.

It's low-impact, so your knees, ankles, and other joints don't get overly stressed. "Almost everyone can do tai chi," Nelson says. In fact, a few of Nelson's students are in their 90s, and he says they often see results quickly.

Jurisson isn't surprised. "Many researchers have noted positive benefits within a month or two of practicing, and some people report feeling better than they have in years after trying it for a single hour," she says.

If you're not active now, you may notice a difference simply because you're gently moving again. "When you repeatedly compress the joints, the synovial fluid flows in the cartilage better," Jurisson says. "That nourishes it, which makes the ends of joints slippery so they can move smoothly."

Better Balance

Tai chi can also help your muscle strength and balance, says Leigh F. Callahan, PhD, a professor of medicine at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

She led a study based on a tai chi program run by the Arthritis Foundation. The results: People in the 8-week course improved their ability to balance, and reported less pain, fatigue, and stiffness.

Other research, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, has found that tai chi can be helpful for people who have fibromyalgia, a condition that causes widespread pain (which may include but is not limited to the joints). It's also been shown to aid people with chronic low back pain, as well as those with ankylosing spondylitis, an inflammatory disease of the spine.

You might also like the meditative aspects of tai chi. "Many people find that it's easier to focus on a specific thought or mantra while they're moving, which is exactly what you do in tai chi," Jurisson says.

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