

# Eastern Exercise Meets Western Needs

**I**F YOU BELIEVE that vigorous, sweat-producing exercise is the only way to stay fit and avert the common ailments associated with aging, think again. Tai Chi is a graceful martial arts form using slow, precise movements that research in several countries has shown can help deal with a host of ills: arthritis, high blood pressure, poor balance, and stress among them. And the list keeps growing. The latest study details the protective effect of Tai Chi against an illness that involves the body's immune system.

Specifically, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, undertook an investigation of how Tai Chi influences immune cell

function in older men and women to reduce the risk for shingles, an itchy and often painful rash caused by the same virus as chicken pox. After just 15 weeks, a group of people who practiced Tai Chi for 45 minutes three times a week experienced up to a 50 percent increase in the immune system's memory T-cells, which are responsible for attacking the virus that causes shingles (herpes-zoster). In addition to a boost in immunity against shingles, "the subjects felt more relaxed and reported having more energy," comments lead investigator, Michael R. Irwin, MD.

## Other health benefits of Tai Chi

As noted above, scientists around the world have been investigating the effects of Tai Chi on a number of different chronic conditions, as well as on general health and wellness. Here are details of what they have discovered it can do in terms of other health-promoting benefits.

### Attacks Arthritis

As age increases, so does susceptibility to arthritis-related joint pain, stiffness, and reduced strength and mobility. Therefore, safe and effective treatment of this condition—and prevention if possible—is essential.

Tai Chi is one effective option. In a research collaboration between Australian and Korean scientists, when a group of older adults with osteoarthritis participated in Tai Chi exercises for 12 weeks, they experi-

enced 35 percent less pain, 29 percent less stiffness, and 29 percent greater improvement in their ability to perform daily tasks than a group of non Tai Chi subjects. Their balance and abdominal strength also improved significantly compared to the control group.

People with rheumatoid arthritis can benefit, too. At the Tufts-New England Medical Center, rheumatoid arthritis sufferers with an average age of 50 who practiced Tai Chi twice a week for 3 months had fewer tender joints than a control group who simply received general health education and did some stretching exercises.

### Improves Balance and Reduces Falls

In a study out of Emory University, 200 men and women with an average age of 70 were separated into three groups—a Tai Chi group, a balance-training group, and an education group that received information about health and wellness. The Tai Chi group met once a week in a class setting and was asked to practice Tai Chi at home for 15 minutes twice a day. At the end of the 15-week trial, members of that group cut their risk of falling more than the balance-training and education groups. They also reported less fear of falling, which has important implications in quality of life and self-confidence.

### Lowers Blood Pressure

Who would think that slow-moving, breathing-focused exercises involving

specific poses could confer benefits similar to aerobic exercise? Turns out, they can. In a study of overweight, sedentary individuals ages 60 to 80, those who participated in Tai Chi lowered their systolic blood pressure (the first number in a blood pressure reading) by seven points, on average. An aerobic exercise group lowered theirs by just a single point more. The reduction in blood pressure translates to a reduced risk for stroke and heart attack.

## How Tai Chi is performed

Tai chi does not require heavy breathing or sweating or deliberate weight lifting. The moves, which have names like *Passing Clouds*, *White Crane Spreads Its Wings*, and *Step Up to Seven Stars*, are non-impact, controlled motions that focus on balance, breathing, and body awareness, with the emphasis on *focus*. Instead of zoning out to the television or radio (as is often the case with the standard "Western" exercise prescription), Tai Chi exercisers work to improve mind-body awareness—tuning in rather than out.

Essentially, you move through different positions and hold a variety of poses. Typically, the motions are circular, with static poses intermingled. Certain poses are centered on balance, while others may involve strength or mental concentration. Throughout all of the movements and poses, the aim is on slow, deep breathing and focusing your energy.

The great thing about this martial art form that's gentle on the body is that virtually anyone can do it with proper instruction. The moves start out simple before progressing to more complicated poses; have been proven safe for older adults; and can even be modified if necessary.

## How Tai Chi Fits In

We're not suggesting you stop exercising vigorously if you're already doing so, nor that you stop lifting weights. Both activities are extremely benefi-

**Did you know...** While Americans should eat more whole grains and less refined wheat, no refined wheat whatsoever may not be the best bet. Refined wheat, unlike whole,

cial—and necessary for the best physical health possible. But whether or not you're already active, consider joining a Tai Chi class to enhance your current health and fitness. For individuals who are sedentary or minimally active, Tai Chi may be just the thing to get you back to a healthy, active lifestyle by helping to improve strength and balance and by reducing certain chronic

disease symptoms like arthritis pain. For those who are already active, Tai Chi will add to your overall fitness while opening yet another stress valve.

To find a Tai Chi class in your area, contact your local community center, senior citizens center, or Y—all three may have affordable classes available.

Also, obtain approval from your health care provider prior to partici-

pation. While Tai Chi is not physically demanding, it can be *posturally* demanding, and your physician will be able to ascertain whether balance exercises are right for you.

To learn more about Tai Chi, surf to [www.taichichih.org](http://www.taichichih.org). Or check out *Tai Chi Chih!: Joy Through Movement* (Good Karma Publishing, Inc., Fort Yates, North Dakota, \$15.95), by Justin E. Stone.

## Can Tai Chi Help People With Cancer?

**W**hen Catherine Kerr was diagnosed with myeloma, or cancer of the bone marrow blood plasma cells, in 1996, she was told that she would have to start aggressive drug treatment within a year. But because the pharmaceutical regimen that was going to be prescribed for her type of cancer involved steroids that could cause her to lose sleep, develop an out-of-control appetite, and also experience psychological disturbances, she wanted to hold off for as long as possible.

She turned to Boston-based martial arts expert Ramel Rones, who works frequently with cancer patients.

Mr. Rones taught her Tai Chi and a related type of martial arts exercise called Qigong (pronounced Chi Kung), which incorporates the slow movements, postures, and controlled breathing of Tai Chi but also puts a special emphasis on maintaining a relaxed yet focused mind/body awareness. Her cancer lay relatively dormant for 5 years, until lab results showed an elevated myeloma protein level in her body and she did need to begin taking strong steroid medications. Various side effects cropped up, but Kerr continued the exercises, which, she says "have helped tremendously." For instance, she relates, "on the days I am treated with steroids I can feel a roaring in my ears, as if I were standing next to a rushing brook. But I have used 'Embrace the Tree' and other moves to stay connected to myself—to feel my feelings, control my appetite, and let me sleep."

Are the effects of the exercise medical ones—a delay in the ravages of cancer and a physiological ability to withstand the effects of strong drugs? Emotional ones—a sense of self-efficacy in the face of a serious disease? Or both? That's just what researchers are trying to figure out. It may be that Eastern exercises help on both fronts.

Research published earlier this year in the *American Journal of Chinese Medicine* demonstrated that white blood cell and lymphocyte counts, both of which are vital to immune function and compromised during chronic stress, increased significantly in people directly following a bout of Qigong exercise. And investigators at Harvard have reported that cancer patients in various stages of

treatment who participated in Qigong experienced improved physical and mental functioning; a better ability to deal with pain and fatigue; and increased quality in their personal relationships along with a better sense of control of their disease.

Kerr, a Harvard PhD (in history), is so committed to Qigong for cancer patients because of her own experience that she is one of a group of Harvard researchers helping to conduct a clinical trial at Boston's Dana Farber Cancer Institute that's slated to begin next month. For 12 weeks, Mr. Rones will give Qigong instruction to breast cancer patients whose cancer has already spread. The researchers will then look at whether patients report lifts in mood and quality of life. They will also look at whether the study subjects experience beneficial changes in their daily hormone balances (which previous research found can be predictive of survival).

Dr. Kerr suggests that if patients are able to complete this small study and report some of the same benefits that Mr. Rones has already seen in his own students with advanced cancer, "this would be a very important finding, in large part because it would be the first research demonstrating an exercise therapy that is safe for people who have compromised health and functioning due to advanced cancer that has already metastasized."

As scientific inquiry continues to progress, scientists may be able to determine the exact physiologic mechanisms that allow Eastern exercises to bring benefits to people not just with cancer but also with other chronic, life-threatening diseases. But, comments Dr. Kerr, "while as a researcher I remain interested in the how and why, as one who has finally begun to learn to live in her body I no longer need a scientific study to help me interpret what I feel in my bones."

Anyone who has cancer or a loved one with the disease should not rely on Tai Chi and related exercises as a *cure*. But perhaps the slow, graceful moves may help to lessen the severity of cancer symptoms or treatments and help improve the physical and emotional quality of life in the bargain. Finding a skilled instructor is key. If he or she has experience working with cancer patients or other seriously ill people, so much the better.

is fortified with the B vitamin folate, which is in short supply in many diets.