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Tai chi: Discover the many possible health benefits

By Mayo Clinic staff

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Tai chi: Discover the many possible health benefits

The ancient art of tai chi uses gentle flowing movements to reduce the stress of today's busy lifestyles and improve health. Find out how to get started.

By Mayo Clinic staff

If you're looking for another way to reduce stress, consider tai chi (TIE-chee). Tai chi is sometimes described as "meditation in motion" because it promotes serenity through gentle movements — connecting the mind and body. Originally developed in ancient China for self-defense, tai chi evolved into a graceful form of exercise that's now used for stress reduction and to help with a variety of other health conditions.

Understanding tai chi

Tai chi, also called tai chi chuan, is a noncompetitive, self-paced system of gentle physical exercise and stretching. To do tai chi, you perform a series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner. Each posture flows into the next without pause, ensuring that your body is in constant motion.

Tai chi has many different styles, such as yang and wu. Each style may have its own subtle emphasis on various tai chi principles and methods. There are also variations within each style. Some may focus on health maintenance, while others focus on the martial arts aspect of tai chi.

The result of all this variation is that there are more than 100 possible movements and positions with tai chi, many of which are named for animals or nature. Regardless of the variation, all forms of tai chi include rhythmic patterns of movement that are coordinated with breathing to help you achieve a sense of inner calm. The concentration required for tai chi forces you to live in the present moment, putting aside distressing thoughts.

Who can do tai chi

The intensity of tai chi varies depending on the form or style practiced. Some forms of tai chi are more fast-paced and exerting than are others, for instance. However, most forms are gentle and suitable for everyone. So you can practice tai chi regardless of your age or physical ability — tai chi emphasizes technique over strength. In fact, because tai chi is low impact, it may be especially suitable if you're an older adult who otherwise may not exercise.

You may also find tai chi appealing because it's inexpensive, requires no special equipment and can be done indoors or out, either alone or in a group.

Although tai chi is generally safe, consider talking with your doctor before starting a new program. This is particularly important if you have any problems with your joints, spine or heart, if you are pregnant, if you have any fractures, or if you have severe osteoporosis.

Why give tai chi a try

Like other complementary and alternative practices that bring mind and body together, tai chi can help reduce stress. During tai chi, you focus on movement and breathing. This combination creates a state of relaxation and calm. Stress, anxiety and tension should melt away as you focus on the present, and the effects may last well after you stop your tai chi session. Tai chi also might help your overall health, although it's not a substitute for traditional medical care.

Despite its long history, tai chi has been studied scientifically only in recent years. And although more research is needed, preliminary evidence suggests that tai chi may offer numerous benefits beyond stress reduction, including:

- Reducing anxiety and depression
- Improving balance, flexibility and muscle strength
- Reducing falls in older adults
- Improving sleep quality
- Lowering blood pressure
- Improving cardiovascular fitness in older adult
- Relieving chronic pain
- Increasing energy, endurance and agility
- Improving overall feelings of well-being

Getting started with tai chi

Wondering how to get started in tai chi? Even though you can rent or buy videos or books about tai chi, consider seeking guidance from a qualified tai chi instructor to gain the full benefits and learn proper techniques. A tai chi instructor may also be able to teach you about the philosophy underlying this relaxation technique.

A tai chi instructor can teach you specific positions and how to regulate your breathing. An instructor also can teach you how to practice tai chi safely, especially if you have injuries, chronic conditions, or balance or coordination problems. Although tai chi is slow and gentle, with virtually no negative side effects, it's possible to get injured if you don't know how to do tai chi properly. It's possible you could strain your muscles or overdo it when first learning, or you could aggravate an existing condition. And if you have balance problems, you could possibly fall during tai chi.

You can find tai chi classes in many communities today. To find a class near you, contact your local:

- Senior center

- YMCA
- YWCA
- Health club
- Community education center
- Wellness facility

Keep in mind that tai chi instructors don't have to be licensed, and there are no standard training programs for instructors. So check an instructor's training and experience, get recommendations if possible, and make sure that you're comfortable with his or her approach. Eventually, you may feel confident enough to do tai chi on your own. But if you like the social element, consider sticking with group tai chi classes.

Maintaining the benefits of tai chi

To reap the greatest stress reduction and other health benefits from tai chi, consider practicing it regularly. While you may get some benefit from a 12-week tai chi class, you may enjoy longer and bigger benefits if you continue tai chi for the long term and become more skilled.

You may find it helpful to practice tai chi in the same place and at the same time every day to develop a routine. But if your schedule is erratic, do tai chi whenever you have a few minutes. You can even draw on the soothing mind-body concepts of tai chi without performing the actual movements if you get stuck in stressful situations — a traffic jam or a contentious work meeting, for instance.

References

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