

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida

Tune in to Tai Chi

It took centuries for the gentle, flowing form of exercise called tai chi to cross the ocean from China. Now, tai chi has achieved solid footing on Western shores, gaining popularity across America.

"Tai chi is not mystical; there's no religious connotation. It's about movement," says Robert H. Whipple, P.T., M.A., an assistant professor in the neurology department at the University of Connecticut Health Sciences Center and a tai chi practitioner for 30 years.

Tai chi involves a series of slow, turning movements that are held as poses for a second or several seconds. You bend your knees slightly, relax your body, align your hips and move very slowly into the poses. How deeply you bend your knees and how long you hold a pose depends on your ability and age.

"Tai chi is a good form of exercise and relaxation for the young and the not-so-young," says David Edelberg, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at Rush Medical College in Chicago. "It can improve strength, balance, flexibility, posture, definitely helps to reduce stress, and studies show that tai chi can reduce blood pressure."

Some senior citizens are learning tai chi to improve their balance and reduce their risk of falling, a hazard that accounts for \$12 billion a year in health care costs. In a study published by the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (JAGS), Whipple and other researchers found that 110 healthy seniors used tai chi for six months to retain strength they had gained in a three-month light weight-training program. Participants improved their balance by 25 percent to 50 percent while increasing strength an average of 17 percent.

Tai chi offers an aerobic benefit, too. Deborah Rohm Young, Ph.D., of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, studied 62 overweight people over age 60 who had high blood pressure and who began performing tai chi four to five times a week for 30 to 45 minutes. After three months, they showed a blood pressure drop similar to what might result from moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, according to a 1999 JAGS report. The experts believe tai chi helps reduce stress by providing physical exertion that makes you concentrate on it, rather than on whatever may be causing your stress.

"The slowness buys you the time to carefully mull over your movements," Whipple explains. That's part of tai chi's attraction at any age.

"Tai chi can help an older person become stronger and more stable so they are able to rise from a seated position more easily and have better balance," says D. Diana Yin, M.D., clinical instructor of medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia. "And it can help a younger person become stronger, improve balance and help them deal with stress more easily and develop a sense of well-being."

"You'll know it's a good thing in one evening," says Dr. Edelberg, and it won't be long before you can practice basic movements at home. "Books and videotapes about tai chi are not the place to start," he warns. "These would be fine -- once you've taken a course and the instructor has had a chance to teach you the basics, make sure you're moving correctly and that you won't injure yourself."

Whipple recommends you start by asking your doctor if a tai chi class would be good for you. "Also, if you're a mature individual, ask the instructor if he or she has had experience teaching senior citizens." Mr. Whipple recommends the Tai Chi Handbook, by Herman Kauz, for further help.

One of the good things about tai chi is that you can learn and practice the art according to your own abilities. "Tai chi can be practiced on many different levels, and no one should push you past your own ability," says Dr. Edelberg. "There shouldn't be any strain."

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