

Tai Chi - health benefits

Tai Chi is one of the 'soft' martial arts developed by the ancient Chinese. It is practised increasingly in the West as a means of stress management and exercise. Tai Chi is a series of slow, controlled movements or postures, usually practised outdoors to take advantage of the surrounding energy of nature. Central to Tai Chi is the belief in the life essence, or Qi (pronounced 'chee'), that flows through invisible channels or meridians in the body. When the flow of Qi is disrupted, illness is the result. The regular practice of Tai Chi is said to strengthen and improve Qi. According to scientific studies, Tai Chi is an effective healing tool for a range of disorders, particularly chronic (for example, arthritis and heart disease) and stress related conditions.

A range of disorders

Tai Chi can help to improve a range of disorders, including:

- Anxiety
- Arthritis
- Balance and coordination
- Fatigue
- Joint stiffness
- Muscle tension
- Poor posture
- Stress.

The physical benefits

The Tai Chi movements can be loosely described as shadow boxing or 'shadow kung fu' in slow motion. Regular practice can increase flexibility and strength, and improve cardiovascular fitness. The emphasis on correct posture means that Tai Chi can instil a greater awareness of the body and how it moves through space. Tai Chi is also prized as a form of meditation. By focusing exclusively on performing the body movements with grace and poise, the mind achieves a calm, empty clarity.

Qi, Yin and Yang

The ancient Chinese proposed that all living things are sustained by an energy force called Qi that flows through invisible meridians in the body. Yin and Yang are the complete polar opposite of each other: the softer, more pliant and yielding, more feminine and more negative aspects in anything are viewed as Yin while the more masculine, harder, more rigid and more positive aspects are seen as Yang. Both sides complement each other completely and together form a perfect whole.

Things which are perfectly balanced and in harmony will be at peace, which leads naturally to longevity. Half of certain organs and meridians are governed by Yin and the other half by Yang. Qi circulates around the body to maintain the balance of yin and yang. The type of illness that develops depends on which meridian is suffering from an imbalance. The ultimate purpose of Tai Chi was to strengthen Qi and maintain its smooth flow, thus Tai Chi can prevent as well as cure some illness.

Learning Tai Chi

It is possible to learn Tai Chi yourself using books and videos, but most practitioners recommend that you join a reputable class and learn from an experienced teacher. People of all ages and fitness levels can practice Tai Chi and gain health benefits. It is non-competitive and gentle. The 'no pain, no gain' philosophy of some other forms of exercise has no place in Tai Chi; if it hurts, you're trying too hard. The idea is to relax and enjoy the peaceful movement.

Special considerations

If you are over 40, overweight, suffering from a chronic illness or haven't taken regular exercise in a long time, it is a good idea to check with your doctor before starting Tai Chi or any other exercise program.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Tai Chi teacher
- Tai Chi association Tel. (02) 9534 7788
- Arthritis Victoria toll free Tel: 1800 011 041 or Tel: (03) 8531 8000

Things to remember

- Tai Chi originated in ancient China. It is an effective exercise for health and wellbeing.
- Tai Chi is a series of gentle, graceful movements designed to exercise the body and clear the mind.
- Scientific studies have found Tai Chi to be particularly helpful in treating stress related disorders.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Tai Chi Association of Australia

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