

Healing From Within – The Wonder of Tai Chi

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Editorial

You may call me biased, but if I am asked to name one exercise that accommodates all ages and fitness levels, combines mind-body interaction, stretching, strengthening, cardio workout, and endurance training, I would give a definitive answer, and that's Tai Chi.

Tai Chi has been practiced for hundreds of years, starting in the Central China as a form of martial art, and making its widespread influence in the early twentieth century. Due to its perceived health and healing benefits, later it became better known worldwide as a form of exercise, beyond its original purpose. So, are the health benefits of Tai Chi for real?

Even my patients tell me that they have read about Tai Chi and it is good for balance and prevention of falls, which seem to be the most widely accepted benefits of Tai Chi. [1] 2004 United States Surgeon General specifically recommended Tai Chi as a good exercise for fall prevention. However, speaking of Tai Chi only in terms of fall prevention is a short sell of its all-rounded health influence.

As how much now we emphasize mindfulness and its health benefits [2] Joseph Pilates said, "in 10 sessions you'll feel a difference. In 20 sessions you'll see a difference. In 30 sessions you'll have a whole new body." Tai Chi is all about mindfulness: "Yi Ling Shen Sui" literally meaning that the mind should lead body movements. Because mind can guide body in a lightning speed, this is how a Tai Chi master conjures a powerful strike in the last split of second when being challenged. Tai Chi is cousin to Qi Gong, also emphasizing the focus on the flow of internal energy "Qi", which prompts smooth and continuous movements of the body and limbs. Breathing is orchestrated with the choreographic movements, the external demonstration of an integral interaction between mind and body. Tai Chi possibly reaps the following health benefits through mindfulness: decreased stress, anxiety, sadness, confusion, anger and fear [3]; enhanced attentiveness and decreased anxiety in adolescents with ADHD [4]; improved sleep latency, duration, and efficiency [5,6].

One of the most common reasons we hear in clinical practice that patients do not exercise is because of chronic pain; the fear of further injury from exercising leading to more intensified pain becomes the rationalization behind a sedentary and inactive life style. Education is important in these patients, and Tai Chi can be an exercise form to break this vicious cycle of inactivity, pain, debilitation, and depression. Although the mechanisms of training related injuries, whether during flexibility or strength training, vary widely, some common risk factors include overuse and repetitive stress beyond our body's own adaptive potential. Tai Chi, however, uses practitioner's own body weight for stretching and strengthening, through smooth continuous movements, and almost never repetitive from one movement to the next. The circular motions of arms and torso not only exercise big muscle

groups, but as well activate small fine muscles. To support the body steadily for an entire program in low stance, the muscles in the lower extremities are strengthened [7], in the same manner as what knee exercises would protect against degenerative progression in the knee joints. Arthritis Foundation, United States Department of Health and Human Services Agency for Health Care Policy and Research Clinical Practice Guideline all recommended Tai Chi as a means of managing osteoarthritis [8].

The most wonder about Tai Chi is its aerobic capacity. Studies have shown that after 60 minutes of Tai Chi with two 3-minute breaks, there is increased peak oxygen uptake and consumption, and increased heart rate, comparable to moderate aerobic exercises [9]. This seemingly slow motion exercise fit for the elderly produces obvious cardiovascular benefits [10] without the need for huffing, puffing and joint pain, such as after running.

Likely due to the complexity of Tai Chi and lack of proper certification process for instructors, research studies are still limited to small sample sizes and uncontrolled quality and dosage. It is as well difficult to design a double blinded sham-controlled trial. Therefore, there is a calling for more rigorous research studies to demonstrate not only the effects of Tai Chi, but also the underlying mechanisms, in order to benefit our understanding of this all-rounded exercise for ultimate health and healing from inside.

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