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## Healthy Aging Guide

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### Tai Chi Exercises Both Mind and Body

#### Centuries-old practice gains new followers.

By [Barbara Russi Sarnataro](#)Reviewed by [Lou](#)

WebMD Weight Loss Clinic-Feature

The movement is slow, graceful, and fluid. The effort is almost undetectable. Most people are wearing street clothes, but some have special shoes.

Could this really be exercise? Absolutely.

Tai Chi is a centuries-old Chinese practice designed to exercise the mind and body through a series of gentle, flowing postures that create a kind of synchronized dance.

Deeply rooted in Chinese meditation, medicine, and martial arts, tai chi (pronounced "tie chee") combines mental concentration with slow, controlled movements to focus the mind, challenge the body, and improve the flow of the Chinese call "qi" (also spelled "chi") -- the life energy thought to sustain health and quiet the mind.

Found in many community centers, health clubs, and studios in the United States, tai chi is lauded for its gentle accessibility.

In fact, almost anyone can do it, even those with conditions that may exclude them from other forms of exercise, says Douglas, tai chi teacher and founder of World Tai Chi & Qigong Day. Seniors, the overweight, and the arthritic can participate.

#### Benefits of Tai Chi

The list of benefits that regular practice of Tai Chi can bring is long, according to advocates. It can improve strength, balance, and coordination. Some research also suggests that tai chi may help to improve heart function and decrease blood pressure.

One of the most significant benefits is stress reduction, says Douglas, who lives and works outside Kansas City.

Stress is known to aggravate some health conditions, he says. And, according to some estimates, unmanaged stress is costing U.S. businesses billions each year.

"If we provided tools like tai chi and qigong and other mind-body techniques through public education, every kid graduating high school as a tai chi or yoga master," Douglas says. "This could conceivably save hundreds of billions of dollars, not once, but every year."

Just learning to relax and breathe more deeply can be reason enough to take tai chi, says Warren D. Conner, founder of the Tai Chi Ch'uan Study Center of the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area.

"You can take what you learn from the practice and transfer that to daily life," he says.

#### The Body and the Mind

In tai chi, both the mind and the body are constantly challenged. It is hard to say which benefits more, say exper

"Initially, benefits are physical," says Conner. "For learning purposes, you start with the body. You learn a set sequence of movements, all in the same order, and you have to pay attention. When you pay attention, you purchase awareness." Santa Fe tai chi instructor Robin Johnson says it's more like thinking of the two as one.

"Tai chi (and qigong) demonstrate how inextricably interwoven the mental and physical body is," says Douglas, in *Stalking the Yang Lu-Chan: Finding Your Tai Chi Body*. "Your mood, your emotional states, and your physical state all beginning to improve at the same time."

Practicing tai chi also helps to counteract the repetitiveness of our jobs and daily routines, where our bodies move in limited ways, Johnson says.

"Sitting in front of a computer all day abuses the body," says Johnson. "We're not using our body's versatility. Like you don't use it, it gets sticky and stuck."

### **Super for Seniors**

Of course, aging also takes a toll on our bodies. Over time, strength lessens, elasticity fades, joint mobility decreases. Because balance is compromised as well, the likelihood of falling increases with age. In fact, falls are the leading cause of injuries in older adults.

Because tai chi often involves shifting weight from one leg to the other, it can increase both balance and leg strength in older adults.

"Tai chi is the best balance conditioning exercise in the world," says Douglas. "And if tai chi can cut falls in half, that's a profound thing."

A 2001 study conducted by the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, reported that seniors who took Tai Chi classes an hour twice a week reported having an easier time with activities like walking, climbing, bending, lifting, eating, and so on than their peers who did not participate in the classes.

### **Tai Chi and Weight**

Because tai chi is low impact, experts say, it's a good choice for people carrying extra weight, who often have knee and joint limitations. If you can't walk or do traditional exercise without pain, tai chi may be gentle enough to get you moving. With regular practice, they say, you will begin to burn calories and lose weight.

Johnson says tai chi also speaks to the mental aspect of being overweight.

When you're overeating and not moving enough, your body becomes stressed, he says. Practicing tai chi gets you in touch with your body and makes you more aware of its needs.

"If our body becomes more centered," says Johnson, "we don't need to be compulsively consuming food."

### **Tai Chi and Weight continued...**

Tai chi may also help you deal with emotions that can trigger overeating, experts say.

"A lot of times, people are eating for reasons that have nothing to do with nourishment," Conner says. "We need to get in touch with what's really going on."

Tai chi's mental benefits can also give us the perspective we need to make wiser food choices.

"A lot of our dietary choices are based on our state of stress and anxiety," says Douglas. "After a stressful day, you're never drawn to steamed broccoli. We crave greasy, salty food that helps us forget about the stress of the day."

Take 20 minutes to do a little tai chi, he says, and "your palate has a whole different need. You're not denying yourself, you're just more in tune to what the body is really asking for."

### **Choosing a Class**

Thinking about trying out tai chi? Here are some tips to help you find a class that's right for you:

Visit at least 2 classes, if possible. Most instructors allow you to visit or sample a class free or for a minimal cost of joining.

See if you feel comfortable with the teacher and like his or her style.

Ask the teacher about his or her experience. Questions to ask include: How long have you been practicing? How long have you taught? Who is your teacher?

Speak to the students in the class. Ask them what they like about it, and what keeps them coming back.

Make sure you enjoy the class. If it's not fun for you, you won't want to go, and you won't reap the benefits.

Keep in mind that before starting any new exercise regime, it's a good idea to check with your doctor.

### Looking for More?

A little extra support goes a long way when it comes to diet goals. Get the free help you need from WebMD's Healthy Eating newsletter!

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Reviewed on June 23, 2006

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