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Health Benefits of Tai Chi and Qigong

Tai chi and qigong are two mind-body practices that originated in ancient China. Practiced widely in China for thousands of years, both tai chi and qigong have become popular in the West. This might be because people of almost any age or condition can learn them.

Large, clinical studies on the health benefits of tai chi and qigong are lacking. But many who practice tai chi and qigong report heightened feelings of well-being along with a variety of other health benefits. A few studies are beginning to support some of these claims.

What is tai chi?

Tai chi is a type of low-impact, weight-bearing, and aerobic -- yet relaxing -- exercise. It began as a martial art. As it developed, it took on the purpose of enhancing physical and mental health. Practiced in a variety of styles, tai chi involves slow, gentle movements, deep breathing, and meditation. The meditation is sometimes called "moving meditation."

Some people believe that tai chi improves the flow of energy through the body, leading to better wellness and a wide range of potential benefits. Those benefits include:

- Improved strength, conditioning, coordination, and flexibility
- Reduced pain and stiffness
- Better balance and lower risk of falls
- Enhanced sleep
- Greater awareness, calmness, and overall sense of well being

What are the health benefits of tai chi?

Because of the gentle nature of tai chi, researchers are particularly interested in the potential tai chi has of providing benefits for older adults. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) and other agencies are funding a variety of tai chi research studies. Some of the findings from these studies suggest a wide range of benefits. Overall results, though, have been mixed, and more research is needed to confirm the health claims that are being made.

Here are some examples of the kind of results that have encouraged researchers:

Balance and strength. The Oregon Research Institute found that, after six months, tai chi participants were twice as likely to have no trouble performing moderate to rigorous activities as nonparticipants. The benefit was greatest among those who started with the poorest health or worst function. Other studies have shown a reduction in falls among tai chi participants. In the 1990s, two studies sponsored by the National Institute on Aging (NIA) found that tai chi exercises cut the fear of falling and risk of falls among older people. Two small sports medicine studies suggest that tai chi may improve sensitivity to nerve signals in ankles and knees, which might prevent falls. But an evidence-based review of many studies only confirmed better balance -- not a reduction in falls.

Osteoarthritis. Patients with osteoarthritis assigned to a tai chi group during a three-month study reported less joint pain and stiffness than when they started. They also had less pain and stiffness than patients in a control group.

Sleep. Exploring tai chi's impact on sleep, the Oregon researchers found that tai chi participants had improved sleep quality and length. They also had fewer sleep disturbances than people in a low-impact exercise group. A UCLA study of tai chi chih, a Westernized version of tai chi, also supports claims of sleep benefits. The benefits are similar to those gained through drugs or cognitive behavioral therapy. Two-thirds of the people practicing tai chi chih had major improvements in sleep quality, compared with one-third who of those involved in health education sessions.

Shingles. A viral disease that causes a painful skin rash and blisters, shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. In a shingles study supported by the NIA and NCCAM, researchers found that tai chi prompted an immune response to the varicella-zoster virus similar to that prompted by the varicella vaccine. When combined with the vaccine, tai chi helped create even greater levels of immunity -- double those of the control group. Tai chi participants also reported improvements in function, pain, vitality, and mental health.

What is qigong?

Qigong -- pronounced chee gong -- is a practice that involves a series of postures and exercises -- including slow, circular movements -- regulated breathing, focused meditation, and self-massage.

There is a variety of styles, and they are classified as martial, medical, or spiritual. Some qigong styles are gentler like tai chi and can easily be adapted. Others are more vigorous like kung fu.

One unique feature of qigong is its ability to train the mind to direct the body's energy, or chi, to any part of the body. Some believe that, when moved correctly, chi can bring your body to a natural state of balance. Qigong is believed to relax the mind, muscles, tendons, joints, and inner organs -- helping to improve circulation, relieve stress and pain, and restore health.

As with tai chi, a variety of benefits have been linked to qigong. They include:

- Greater stamina and vitality
- Reduced stress
- Enhanced immune system
- Improved cardiovascular, respiratory, circulatory, lymphatic, and digestive function
- Lower blood pressure
- Less risk of falling

Practiced widely in the clinics and hospitals of China, qigong may have broad health benefits. However, most of the studies conducted on qigong are limited in scope. Many are small case studies conducted in China -- not large, randomized, controlled trials reported in peer-reviewed English-language journals.

What are the health benefits of qigong?

Some believe that as a complement to Western medicine, qigong can help the body heal itself, retarding or even reversing the effects of certain diseases linked to aging. Here are a few examples of findings from small studies showing qigong benefits:

High blood pressure. In a study lasting 20 years, patients with hypertension -- whether in the control or qigong group -- were given drugs to control blood pressure. At first, participants in both groups had a drop in blood pressure. But blood pressure in the qigong group stabilized over time. They even were able to lower their use of blood pressure drugs. By contrast, the control group had an increase in blood pressure, requiring greater use of drugs.

Immune system. Just 30 minutes of daily qigong training for one month might produce a tangible impact on the body's immune system. In one study, blood samples taken the day before training started and after it was completed showed a statistically significant difference in white blood cell counts.

Stroke. In one study looking at mortality, among patients who'd suffered a stroke, 86 in the qigong group survived compared with 68 in the control group. That was after a period of 30 years. Compared to the control group, patients practicing qigong had a 50% reduction in death from any cause, death from stroke, and sickness related to stroke. However, it's not clear if the qigong participants were already healthier, making them more likely to live longer.

Fibromyalgia. One small pilot study showed fewer symptoms and improvement in function among patients with fibromyalgia who were practicing qigong. Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition that can cause widespread pain and fatigue. Larger trials are needed to confirm the results.

Are there any special precautions for tai chi or qigong?

Both tai chi and qigong are gentle exercises with few risks. However, if you are older, have a health condition, or have not exercised in a long time, tell your health care provider if you want to try either of these practices. Think of both as complements to Western medicine, and not replacements for it.

In general, use caution if you are pregnant or if you have a joint problem or severe osteoporosis. It is best to not do tai chi or qigong right after eating, if you are very tired, or if you have an active infection.

For more information about qigong, tai chi, and energy medicine, you can search more than 4,000 citations on line at www.qigonginstitute.org/html/database.php.

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