



## Try tai chi to improve balance, avoid falls

Posted By Stephanie Watson On August 23, 2012

Compared to the pumping intensity of spin or Zumba, a tai chi class looks like it's being performed in slow motion. Watching the gentle, graceful movements of this ancient Chinese practice, it's hard to imagine that tai chi can burn off a single calorie or strengthen muscles. But this exercise program is far more dynamic than it looks.

"The slowness that you see from the outside can be deceptive," says Dr. Peter Wayne, research director of the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School. As an aerobic workout, tai chi is roughly the equivalent of a brisk walk (depending on the intensity at which you perform it). And as a resistance training routine, some studies have found it similar to more vigorous forms of weight training, says Dr. Wayne, who is also founder and director of the Tree of Life Tai Chi Center in Somerville, Massachusetts and co-author of *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi* (due out next spring).

### Tai chi and balance

With its integrative approach that strengthens the body while focusing the mind, tai chi addresses a range of physical and mental health issues—including bone strength, joint stability, cardiovascular health, immunity, and emotional well-being. Tai chi is especially useful for improving balance and preventing falls—a major concern for older adults.

Studies have shown tai chi to reduce falls in seniors by up to 45%, Dr. Wayne says. It can also improve balance in people with neurological problems. A recent study in [The New England Journal of Medicine](#) found the program particularly effective for balance in people with Parkinson's disease.

Tai chi helps improve balance because it targets all the physical components needed to stay upright—leg strength, flexibility, range of motion, and reflexes—all of which tend to decline with age.

Interestingly, one of tai chi's biggest benefits to stability isn't physical—but emotional.

"Anyone who's had a fall or who has instability has what we call a 'fear of falling,'" says Dr. Wayne. "Ironically, a fear of falling is one of the biggest predictors of a fall." By making you firmer on your feet, tai chi takes away that fear, he says. Tai chi also makes you more aware of both your internal body and the external world, giving you a better sense of your position in space, so you won't be as likely to trip and fall if you try to simultaneously talk to a friend and navigate a busy sidewalk.

### Getting started in a tai chi program

One of the best things about tai chi is its adaptability to every age and fitness level. "I've had students in their late 80s," says Jeffrey Shih-chung Matrician, who teaches tai chi at the Harvard University Center for Wellness. Because tai chi has "zero impact," it doesn't put too much strain on aging bones and joints, he adds. "But it's not by any means something that's only for the elderly, and it can be quite demanding for the young," adds Shih-chung Matrician.

"You can start tai chi at most levels of health, and you can ramp up your activities to be appropriate to your level of fitness and function," adds Dr. Wayne. He's had students who've started out sitting in a chair—or even a wheelchair. Over time, they've worked their way into a standing position. Tai chi is also incredibly safe—even for people who are older and have chronic diseases. Dr. Wayne has conducted studies on tai chi that included participants who were awaiting a heart transplant.

To get started, "do a little research," Dr. Wayne suggests. "Look for classes in your community, and then visit some classes that are convenient for you."

Get a feel for the way the class is taught, and see if it matches your learning style. "There are quite a few styles and approaches to tai chi, and you can shop around to find one that suits you," adds Shih-chung Matrician.

Once you've tried a tai chi class, you'll see how this combination of slow, gentle movements adds up to one invigorating workout.

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