Tai Chi Eases Joint Stiffness

A tai chi class at Eisenhower Medical Center.

Practiced since the 12th century, tai chi, a Chinese regimen requiring slow movement and poetic form, can assist with easing sore joints. In fact, many arthritis sufferers subscribe to the low-impact routine's therapeutic qualities.

Each day in parks, gymnasiums and hospitals like Eisenhower Medical Center, people gather to practice tai chi. With its slow, synchronized postures that resemble slowmotion choreography, tai chi is designed to exercise the body, mind and spirit in concert. Participants gently work muscles, focus concentration and improve the flow of Qi (pronounced "chee"), a vital life energy that sustains health and calms the mind. In China, tai chi is therapy—a remedy for a variety of ailments.

Gaining acceptance in the western United States, tai chi is appealing to people of all ages and classes, largely because of the smooth motions it requires, unlike jogging and other high-impact exercise regimens, while still offering some beneficial weight-bearing motions. Seniors, including those with arthritis, particularly enjoy tai chi because the controlled movements are simple to learn and perform—and are easy on stiff and sore joints. The technique combines physical motion with relaxation, an ideal stress reliever that can also aid in lowering blood pressure.

The Arthritis Foundation® offers a program designed to improve the quality of life for people with arthritis using "sun-style" tai chi, one of several major recognized styles of tai chi. The style includes agile steps and exercises designed to improve mobility, breathing and relaxation. Movements do not require deep bending or squatting, making tai chi uncomplicated and comfortable to learn. An hour-long class generally consists of 12 movements (six basic and six advanced), a warm-up and a cool-down. The program presents a continual challenge when direction of the movements is reversed or otherwise altered.

Many physicians now recommend tai chi for people with various musculoskeletal conditions, to improve flexibility and build muscle strength over time as well as improve balance. The exercise has been shown to strengthen bones and slow bone loss. People with arthritis find that tai chi eases the joints through their range of motion without putting stress on the body. Those with fibromyalgia or significant muscle pain can also benefit from tai chi, which has been shown to relieve pain.

Tai chi programs are available throughout the world in association with the Arthritis Foundation, including at summer camps for children with juvenile arthritis. Encouraging strength, stamina, relaxation and the social element of participating in a class, tai chi may be an ideal exercise program for many people with arthritis—keeping joints in action and relieving some pain symptoms.

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