

# Health Benefits of Qigong & Tai Chi

## What is Qigong?

Qigong combines the energy work of Oriental medicine with meditation and physical movement. It is China's 5,000 year old system of self-healing. In the USA, our National Institute of Health (NIH) recognizes Qigong as an important form of complementary medicine. NIH has funded millions of dollars in research grants which scientifically prove the many benefits of practicing Qigong. The effectiveness of Qigong has been proven in China by its beneficial impact on the health of millions of people over thousands of years. People from children to centenarians have used these enjoyable, gentle exercises to:

- Slow or reverse the degeneration of aging
- Prevent or to improve healing of illnesses and injuries
- Boost athletic and intellectual performance
- Deeply relax the body and mind
- Improve sexual function
- Reduce stress
- Relieve depression

For most people, the first and foremost benefit of Qigong lies in helping to relieve or prevent chronic health problems. In China, Qigong is used to help relieve a range of disorders including: stress, obesity, diabetes, asthma, poor circulation, internal organ problems, arthritis, nerve pain, bad backs, joint problems, hypertension, autoimmune disorders, cancer and general physical disease.

Qigong, a part of Chinese Medicine, along with acupuncture and therapeutic massage are based on the concept of "Qi - Chi" - internal energy - the life force. Qigong increases Qi, vital life force energy. Cultivation of Qi through practicing Qigong is one way to heal injuries and illnesses, improve your general health or develop certain abilities. Chinese medicine is a holistic system which treats the whole person in context of family, relationship and environment.

## What are the health benefits of qigong?

Some scientific research funded by the National Institute of Health indicates that practicing Qigong can enhance the immune system and help the body build resistance to disease, increase the rate of healing and recovery from many disorders, slow down the ageing process and retard or even reverse the effects of certain diseases linked to aging. Here are a few examples of findings from studies showing the benefits of practicing Qigong:

- **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 and Chronic Fatigue.** Several studies have shown that practicing qigong helps reduce or eliminate the symptoms associated with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue. Women with severe fibromyalgia reported 73% less pain after just 5-7 sessions with a qigong master, according to a Robert Wood Johnson Medical School study, and the benefits continued three months later. "I've never seen pain scores change so dramatically," says study co-author Afton Hassett, PsyD, who notes that larger trials need to be conducted to confirm these benefits. In other research, when qigong was combined with meditation, the pair helped patients reduce their pain as well as prescription drugs, according to University of Maryland researchers. Fibromyalgia is a chronic, debilitating condition that can cause a host of symptoms including widespread pain and fatigue.

## 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. 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.

### **Are there any special precautions for tai chi or qigong?**

- Both tai chi and qigong are gentle exercises with few risks. However, it is always a good idea to check with your primary care provider if you plan to begin a new program of exercise; especially if you are older, have a health condition, or have not exercised in a long time.
- 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](http://www.qigonginstitute.org/html/database.php).
- For instructional videos visit [www.chi-kung.com](http://www.chi-kung.com) or [www.taichiforseniors.com](http://www.taichiforseniors.com)

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