



Choose Tai Chi or Qigong for Head-to-Toe Fitness



Tai chi is practiced in several different styles, but all of the variations involve graceful, flowing movements.

Researchers who reviewed evidence from 77 randomized, controlled trials on tai chi and Qigong found that people who did these gentle mind/body exercises achieved “consistent, significant results for a number of health benefits.” These included bone health, balance, cardiorespiratory fitness, physical function, quality of life, fall prevention and psychological well-being, according to the analysis published in the July/August 2010 issue of the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

Some people are hesitant to try these exercises from the East because they’re unfamiliar. But in

fact, “the stances and poses in tai chi and Qigong are helpful because they mimic many of the movements we do in daily life,” says Scott Siverling, a physical therapist in the Joint Mobility Center of the Weill Cornell-affiliated Hospital for Special Surgery. “For example, a particular stance may require you to place more weight onto one leg than the other, or shift weight back and forth, which is basically what we do when we walk,” he explains. “That shifting of weight usually occurs on a subconscious level, but with tai chi and Qigong, you learn to do it consciously. You can focus on doing movements

with good form, improving your balance and posture at the same time that you’re strengthening various muscle groups.”

Using the whole body. Conventional strength training exercises often involve isolating specific muscles, such as the biceps when doing arm curls, or the muscles around the hip when doing side leg raises. “But tai chi and Qigong incorporate the entire body in all the movements, so you improve how the whole body works in conjunction with a weaker (or injured) part, and you also improve coordination,” Siverling says.

Tai chi and Qigong are similar to gentle yoga, but rather than holding poses, you move very slowly from one pose to another, Siverling explains. “Instead of focusing on holding your end-range of motion, you focus on the slow, easy movements that get all of your body parts moving together. In that way, it’s similar to dancing, and gives you those same psychological and emotional benefits—something you don’t normally get from working out on weight machines.”

Engaging your “life force.” In many tai chi and Qigong classes, you’ll learn to coordinate breathing with movement. This is one way to start tapping into your “chi,” or “life force,” according to

Continued on p2 ...

... Tai Chi for Head-to-Toe Fitness, p2

practitioners. Practically speaking, this means that as you move fluidly through the postures, you'll start becoming more energetic and centered. "Dancers often talk

about moving from their 'center,' which is something we all have. It's like a center of balance, from which all movement in your body emanates," Siverling explains.

"The theory in tai chi and Qigong is that different movements help tap into that center and open it up."

Siverling recommends tai chi and Qigong to many of his physical therapy clients. "Either discipline will benefit anyone who is open-minded and wants to do more complex movements, instead of just walking. It's particularly good for people who may have been more active previously and have become inactive because of an injury or surgery. It's an excellent way to start getting back into shape," he advises. 🧘

TAI CHI TERMS

- The term "tai chi" is an abbreviation of "t'ai chi ch'uan," which translates into "supreme ultimate fist" or "boundless fist."
- A group of movements or postures is called a "form." Forms vary in length, from 13 moves to more than 100 moves.
- Two common styles of tai chi are "Yang" and "Wu."
- Many postures take their names from nature, such as "grasp bird's tail," "carry tiger to mountain," "cloud hands," and "white crane spreads wings."

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- If you have a medical condition or have not exercised in a while, consult with your health care provider before starting tai chi.
- Learning tai chi from a video or book does not ensure that you are doing the movements correctly and safely.
- Look for an instructor who is experienced working with people at your health and fitness level.
- For more information, visit the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) website at nccam.nih.gov/health/taichi.