

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida

Tune in to Tai Chi

It took centuries for the gentle, flowing form of exercise called tai chi to cross the ocean from China. Now, tai chi has achieved solid footing on Western shores, gaining popularity across America.

"Tai chi is not mystical; there's no religious connotation. It's about movement," says Robert H. Whipple, P.T., M.A., an assistant professor in the neurology department at the University of Connecticut Health Sciences Center and a tai chi practitioner for 30 years.

Tai chi involves a series of slow, turning movements that are held as poses for a second or several seconds. You bend your knees slightly, relax your body, align your hips and move very slowly into the poses. How deeply you bend your knees and how long you hold a pose depends on your ability and age.

"Tai chi is a good form of exercise and relaxation for the young and the not-so-young," says David Edelberg, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at Rush Medical College in Chicago. "It can improve strength, balance, flexibility, posture, definitely helps to reduce stress, and studies show that tai chi can reduce blood pressure."

Some senior citizens are learning tai chi to improve their balance and reduce their risk of falling, a hazard that accounts for \$12 billion a year in health care costs. In a study published by the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (JAGS), Whipple and other researchers found that 110 healthy seniors used tai chi for six months to retain strength they had gained in a three-month light weight-training program. Participants improved their balance by 25 percent to 50 percent while increasing strength an average of 17 percent.

Tai chi offers an aerobic benefit, too. Deborah Rohm Young, Ph.D., of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, studied 62 overweight people over age 60 who had high blood pressure and who began performing tai chi four to five times a week for 30 to 45 minutes. After three months, they showed a blood pressure drop similar to what might result from moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, according to a 1999 JAGS report. The experts believe tai chi helps reduce stress by providing physical exertion that makes you concentrate on it, rather than on whatever may be causing your stress.

"The slowness buys you the time to carefully mull over your movements," Whipple explains. That's part of tai chi's attraction at any age.

A growing body of research suggests that practicing tai chi has many benefits for seniors, including a reduced risk of falling and a significant improvement in quality of life. Tai chi is now being used in some cardiac rehabilitation programs and by people with diseases such as fibromyalgia, arthritis and multiple sclerosis, notes Harvey Kurland, an exercise physiologist from Riverside, Calif., who has been studying and teaching tai chi for over 30 years. Kurland teaches for the University of California Riverside. His research, published in the journal ***Sports Medicine, Training and Rehabilitation***, found tai chi to be a low-intensity aerobic exercise equivalent to walking at a three-mile-per-hour pace.

"In Chinese medicine, tai chi is used as a way to relax the body and let the chi [vital energy] flow throughout the body," says Kurland, who credits the 1993 PBS-TV series "Healing and the Mind" with sparking an explosion of American interest in tai chi. Physical activity is considered an essential component of health by the Chinese, who believe that without daily movement the body's chi can become stagnant, which can lead to illness. The existence of this life force has never been scientifically proven by Western standards.

Tai chi can strengthen the legs and arms, improve balance and flexibility, Kurland says. "But the stress reduction benefit is probably the best thing tai chi does for health," he notes. "Stress is the number one health problem in America, with an estimated 60 to 70 percent of all visits to physicians due to stress-related illness. A daily practice that can relieve stress will improve health."