

Tai chi can help with your health, your fitness and much more

GET MOVING

By R.J. Igelzi, Union-Tribune Staff Writer

Trendy fitness routines come and go as quickly as Madonna changes personas. However, when an exercise regimen has been around for 800 years with millions of people still practicing it, it's probably because it really works.

Often called "moving meditation," tai chi is a noncompetitive, self-paced series of 108 postures or poses, including stretching, bending and twisting. The postures were designed to enhance both physical and emotional well-being as each movement flows smoothly into the next, all coordinated with breathing.

Developed in China around the year 1200, tai chi is both a martial art and a philosophy. The ancient Chinese believed that the body was filled with a life-force energy called chi (or qi), which was frequently blocked, causing illness and pain. They used the movements of tai chi to help improve the flow of chi and promote good health.

If you're looking for an activity to help calm the mind, soothe the spirit and invigorate the body, tai chi may be for you.

Health/fitness benefits: It helps reduce stress; improves balance, agility and posture; increases flexibility, muscle strength and definition; boosts energy and stamina; and may help lower blood pressure, along with reducing anxiety, depression and insomnia.

Calories burned: A 155-pound person burns approximately 281 calories an hour doing tai chi, according to nutrstrategy.com.

Who is tai chi good for? Almost anyone of any age or physical ability can benefit from tai chi. Older adults may find tai chi especially appealing because the movements are slow and low impact, and they put minimal stress on muscles and joints. People with arthritis or low back pain and those who are recovering from an injury often find tai chi therapeutic.

Tai chi may be especially beneficial to stroke patients. The University of Illinois at Chicago found that people who learned tai chi after having a stroke showed significant improvements when tested on their ability to maintain balance while shifting weight, leaning in various directions and standing on movable surfaces.

It's also a good supplemental exercise for runners, cyclists and other cardio enthusiasts.

"For all athletes, there's a mental part of training. You have to be in tune with your body to get the most out of your body for performance," says Todd Galati, kinesiologist and personal trainer with San Diego-based American Council on Exercise. "Since tai chi helps you focus on the self and helps improve proprioception (the sense of the relative position of your body in space), it should help you with your sport."

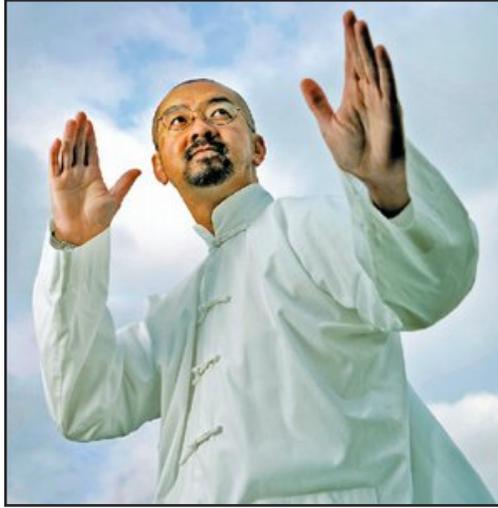
Who is tai chi good for? If you have joint, back or heart problems, check with your doctor before trying tai chi.

How to start: Seek guidance from a qualified tai chi instructor who can teach you specific postures and how to regulate your breathing. Take classes at a tai chi/martial arts center, the YMCA, continuing education classes, community and senior centers and private gyms.

How to choose an instructor: To learn tai chi in its purest form, combining the philosophy with the physical movements, you need to seek out a master tai chi teacher. A master has been chosen and trained by another master teacher of an older generation. The master has usually spent many years perfecting skills and postures. Master instructors usually teach at tai chi or martial arts studios.

For instructors who are not master teachers, make sure they've had experience teaching at all levels.

JOINING THE MOVEMENTS



Henry Cheng, a fifth-generation master of tai chi, demonstrates the movements of the ancient martial art at Mission Bay. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)

Find out what style of tai chi the instructor teaches and make sure it's a good fit for you.

Since tai chi is supposed to create a sense of peace and calm, it's important that you are comfortable and relaxed with the instructor and the other students in class.

How to progress & add challenge: Try to practice some form of tai chi every day, even if only for 10 minutes, to get the full benefit.

Tai chi has more than 100 postures. In the beginning, you may want to limit your form or routine to just a few postures until you feel comfortable and confident in those movements.

As you perfect your skills, you can add more postures. Since each can be divided into four or five smaller movements, with each posture flowing into the next, there are approximately 1,500 posture combinations to try, says Henry Cheng, a master tai chi instructor.

Tips for proper form: There are three types of tai chi, each incorporating various types of movements at various speeds.

Yang style is the most commonly practiced and features large, slow movements, with legs in a wide stance and hands open and loose.

Chen is characterized by a lower stance with large, explosive movements at a varied pace, much like karate.

Wu style features slow, compact movements performed in a narrow stance.

In all styles of tai chi, the upper body should be upright but relaxed, with the shoulders down, elbows close to the body, the abdomen in a neutral position and the derriere tucked under. The back should be "lifted up, so that the spirit or the chi can flow more easily," Cheng says.

Just as in meditation, tai chi is a time for focus and concentration. Put aside distracting thoughts and breathe in a deep, relaxed manner.

Tips to avoid injury: Not only is proper form necessary to attain the correct tai chi posture or movement, but incorrect or sloppy form can increase the risk of injury.

Cheng recommends that knees should never bend beyond the toes and feet should remain flat on the floor, without heels lifting.

Practice at your own pace, in your own frame of flexibility. Don't try to compete with guy next to you in class.

"Tai chi is a noncompetitive form of exercise and movement. Learn to move fluidly so you can get your own personal benefits from it," Galati says.

To minimize the risk of pulled muscles, Cheng recommends avoiding any quick forceful movement or making the motions too large or wide.

Recommended supplemental exercises: Although tai chi offers some modest cardiovascular benefits, it's probably a good idea to add another cardio component to your exercise routine. Galati recommends walking, running, cycling or any activity that raises your heart rate.

Cheng says swimming is the perfect complement to tai chi since "every part of your body moves just like in tai chi."

Staff researcher Denise Davidson contributed to this article.

Contributing tai chi/fitness experts: Henry Cheng, master tai chi instructor and owner of Tai Chi Wellness Center in Clairemont; Todd Galati, kinesiologist and personal trainer with San Diego-based American Council on Exercise.