

THE DYNAMIC PATH TO BALANCE AND PAIN REDUCTION
A presentation of the various health benefits of T'ai Chi Ch'uan
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You've probably seen it in commercials, noticed it in the background of *Law & Order* or other shows set in New York City, or wondered what the heck that group of people was doing on the grass of your local park. That slow-motion, martial dance is T'ai Chi Ch'uan, sometimes simply called T'ai Chi, and it is the centuries-old exercise from China that continues to gain popularity world-wide.



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There are many different, accepted spellings of T'ai Chi Ch'uan (tai chi chuan, taijiquan, etc.). Pronunciations also differ. Many believe that the art is a branch of the ancient discipline known as Qigong (also Chi Kung, chi gong, etc.), which utilizes mind, breath, and movement to create a calm, natural flow and balance of energy in the body. T'ai Chi is Wushu (martial art), though most in the West use Kung-fu or Gung-fu in place of Wushu. Most T'ai Chi players, as most call themselves, focus on the health benefits of the art and not its martial side.

T'ai Chi, as moving meditation, emphasizes inner calm rather than outer strength. Therefore, you can practice the art regardless of your age or athletic ability. As long as the principles are maintained, the integrity of the art is not weakened by your adaptation of the movements to your own capabilities. This remains one of the art's greatest strengths and a major reason for its appeal to older adults. Remember: Before you begin any exercise program, check with your doctor on any specific movements to avoid.

Practice of T'ai Chi can help improve your circulation and help maintain a healthy nervous system. It can also aid in keeping your body flexible, your muscles toned, and your mind alert. There have been several studies in recent years supporting T'ai Chi's claim of health benefits in the areas of digestive disorders, heart disease,

arthritis, weakened immune system, stress reduction, etc. It's a simple fact: the healthier you are, the better your day will be.

It is, however, T'ai Chi's positive impact on balance and coordination, as well as on pain management, that has generated the greatest interest in recent years.

The most cited study regarding T'ai Chi and balance was published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society (May 1996) by researchers at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, GA. The Emory study included over 200 participants above the age of 70. The participants were divided into three groups. One group was given literature on balance and met for discussion sessions. The second group was assigned "balance and coordination" exercises. The third group was taught and practiced a shortened T'ai Chi form. At the close of the nine-month study, members of the T'ai Chi group were the only individuals shown to have significant improvement in balance and coordination. They were 47.5% less likely to fall. A second study, sponsored by the National Institute on Aging, reports that the practice of T'ai Chi is linked to a 25% reduction in injuries to those who do fall. The study was published in the May 1995 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association.



The practice of T'ai Chi has been shown to improve balance and coordination.

Several studies have also been completed in recent years regarding T'ai Chi and arthritis-based pain. An Australian study, published in the September 2003 issue of The Journal of Rheumatology, reports that T'ai Chi practice resulted in countering the effects of osteoarthritis. After learning and practicing a shortened T'ai Chi form over three months, participants were reported to have 35% less pain, 29% less stiffness, and 29% increased ability to perform daily tasks (such as climbing stairs). Other reported benefits include strengthened abdominal muscles and, as noted above, improved balance. The Journal of Nursing Scholarship (Fourth Quarter 2000) also reports on T'ai Chi and pain reduction. The 10-week study, completed at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve

University, used a sliding scale to judge pain level. With 10 being the highest level of pain, participants in this study reported a significant drop in their level of pain from 3.25 to 1.75. The American Journal of Preventative Medicine (August 2002) also reports an 83% overall improvement rate across six categories for arthritis patients practicing T'ai Chi.

As with all things in the wide range of exercises that are available in today's world, individual results with regard to T'ai Chi experiences may vary. However, you will not know if T'ai Chi holds anything for you unless you explore its possibilities. As it has been said, "Even a journey of one thousand miles must begin with a single step."

