

Tai Chi May Help Parkinson's Patients Regain Balance

By Jeannine Stein, Los Angeles Times

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A six-month program of Tai Chi exercises helped people with various stages of Parkinson's disease improve stability, their ability to walk and reduced the frequency of falls.

A study released this week in the *New England Journal of Medicine* compared a six-month tailored Tai Chi program to resistance training and stretching to see which was most effective at improving functional movement, walking and balance for Parkinson's patients.

Researchers randomly assigned 195 men and women ages 40 to 85 who were in stages one to four of Parkinson's disease (on a scale of one to five). Parkinson's is a neurological disorder caused by a loss of neurons that produce dopamine, a chemical involved with muscle function and movement coordination. That can result in tremors, stiffness, poor coordination and more difficulty doing daily activities. It can also lead to a higher risk of falls, which can cause serious injuries.



Tai Chi, a discipline that incorporates slow, deliberate movements, plus breathing, has health benefits that include reducing stress and improving balance and posture.

The study participants were randomly assigned to hour-long, twice weekly sessions of Tai Chi, resistance training or stretching for six months. Researchers assessed their status at the beginning of the study, at three and six months, and three months after the study ended.

The Tai Chi group did better than the stretching group on a few measures: leaning without losing balance, having better directional control of their body, and walking skills. They outperformed the resistance training group on balance and stride length. Those in the Tai Chi group also reduced their frequency of falls more than the stretching group and on a par with the resistance group.

Three months after the study ended, those in the Tai Chi group were able to maintain the benefits they had gained.

"Since many training features in the program are functionally oriented," said Oregon Research Institute scientist Fuzhong Li in a news release, "the improvements in the balance and gait measures that we demonstrated highlight the potential of Tai Chi-based movements in rehabilitating patients with these types of problems and, consequently, easing cardinal symptoms of Parkinson's disease and improving mobility, flexibility, balance and range of motion." Li was the lead author of the study.

He added that Tai Chi has several advantages: "It is a low-cost activity that does not require equipment, it can be done anywhere, at any time, and the movements can be easily learned. It can also be incorporated into a rehabilitation setting as part of existing treatment. Similarly, because of its simplicity, certain aspects of this Tai Chi program can also be prescribed to patients as a self-care/home activity."

Art's Notes: The Washington County Senior Center located at 626 Washington Avenue, Hagerstown, MD, offers Tai Chi classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1:00 to 2:00 PM for those who are at least 55 years old. You can contact the Manager, Kathy Fisher, or the Assistant Manager, Linda Rojahn at 301-671-2368 for additional information.