

Tai chi: Medication in motion

BY MARK FUERST

The science of tai chi is catching up with what tai chi masters have said for centuries: this mind-body practice, which originated in China as a martial art, leads to longer life, more vigor and flexibility, better balance and mobility, and a sense of well-being. Cutting-edge research now supports long-standing claims that tai chi has a favorable impact on the health of the heart, bones, nerves and muscles, immune system and mind.

Tai chi combines meditation with slow, gentle, graceful movements, as well as deep breathing and relaxation to move vital energy (what the Chinese call qi) throughout the body. "Tai chi can heighten bodily awareness and inner focus, make body movements more graceful and efficient, enhance natural breathing and help you attain peace of mind," says Dr. Peter Wayne, assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, who has practiced and studied tai chi for more than 35 years. "Our fast-paced, multitasking, overstimulated, more-is-better, type-A Western lifestyle can be counteracted by the 'meditation in motion' of tai chi."

New research provides insight into the underlying physiological mechanisms that explain how tai chi works. It's also enabled Wayne and his colleagues to shape the core elements of tai chi into a program to use in rehabilitating and preventing many health conditions.

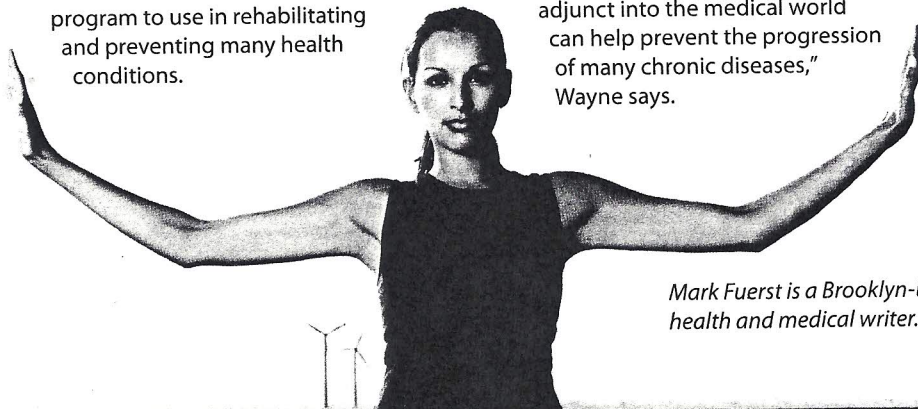
A 12-week controlled study of tai chi in heart-failure cases found that participants were able to walk longer and faster, and had an improved quality of life. What's more, they had reduced blood levels of B-type natriuretic protein, an indicator of heart failure.

A newly completed Harvard randomized controlled trial of post-menopausal women diagnosed with low bone density used bone-density markers and computerized motion analysis to quantify how tai chi affects weight-bearing in the skeleton. The preliminary results show that tai chi arrested bone loss in the hip and spine compared to women who had usual care, Wayne says.

Many other studies have shown the health benefits of tai chi. A Harvard review of 26 English and Chinese studies of tai chi and high blood pressure found that tai chi lowered blood pressure in 85 percent of the trials. Tai chi has also been shown to improve balance, reduce falls in older women, and increase bone strength – all important ways to prevent fractures from low bone density.

And studies show that tai chi may be effective for the rehabilitation and prevention of chronic lower back pain, can reduce the pain of knee osteoarthritis, can reduce stress, can enhance mood and sleep, and may even strengthen the immune system.

"The integration of tai chi as an adjunct into the medical world can help prevent the progression of many chronic diseases," Wayne says.



Mark Fuerst is a Brooklyn-based health and medical writer.