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TAI CHI

Daryl Austin USA TODAY NETWORK

ANCIENT,

EFFECTIVE

EXERCISE

HAS MUCH

IN COMMON

WITH YOGA

While workouts like high-intensity interval training (HIIT) have only been popular since the early 2000s, many other types of exercise have been around much longer. Pilates, for instance, began nearly a century ago as a method of rehabilitation for injured soldiers and dancers. Yoga's origins can be traced back more than 5,000 years before that. And we know that wrestling is older still – as famous cave paintings of the sport date back to more than 15,000 years ago. • Tai chi began more recently than that, but is still considered to be an ancient practice because it was started by a Taoist monk who lived around 1300 AD. It's also something still many practice today – and for good reason.

Tai chi is a yoga-like practice that involves a series of slow, gentle movements and physical postures, a meditative state of mind and controlled breathing, per the U.S. National Center for Complimentary and Integrative Health (NCCIH).

In fact, because both tai chi and yoga are low-intensity ancient exercises that have been shown to have similar health benefits and be particularly beneficial for the elderly, the two practices are considered to have more in common than they are different.

While we know that tai chi originated from martial arts in China, over the years the exercise has become more focused on health promotion and rehabilitation. This is because tai chi has been at the center of more than 500 published medical studies.

It's a body of "credible medical research that has catalyzed tai chi's popularity in the West," notes Peter Wayne, director of the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Harvard Medical School and at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Massachusetts.

Indeed, today "tai chi is a practice that millions of people around the world participate in," said Dr. Paul Lam, a family medicine physician from Sydney, Australia, who has been participating in tai chi since 1974 and is now a tai chi instructor. It's practiced by following specific movements and physical postures in a similar fashion to yoga.

What are the health benefits of tai chi?

There are numerous health benefits of practicing tai chi with the most well-studied and known benefits being associated with improved symptoms related to "arthritis, Parkinson's disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)," said Dong-Yun Wang, a physical therapist based in Flushing, New York, who recommends tai chi as a way of helping her physical therapy patients.

It's also known to improve posture and sleep, and to "relieve stress, improve immunity and lower blood pressure," said Lam.

Wayne adds that the exercise also "improves balance, mobility and reduces falls in older adults," and that there is evidence "supporting its ability to reduce neck, back and knee pain," as well as a means to "improve cognitive function and mood."

Tai chi also can improve both lower-body strength and upper-body strength.

"When practiced regularly, tai chi can be comparable to resistance training and brisk walking, which can enhance aerobic fitness in the elderly," said Wang.

Are there any downsides to tai chi?

Despite such benefits, tai chi isn't for everyone.

"Like all activities and exercises, there is a risk of injury when participating in tai chi," said Lam.

Still, 2019 research indicates that tai chi injuries are far fewer than other forms of exercise, and NCCIH research concludes that "tai chi appears to be safe" for most everyone to practice.

At the same time, because tai chi is so different from other Western exercises with its emphasis on slow movements and mindfulness, "it can take a few weeks to get used to before it becomes enjoyable and beneficial," explained Lam.

To get started, Wang recommends going online to see where tai chi classes are being taught or reaching out to someone who engages in the exercise to experience it alongside them.

If you live in a bigger city, "you may be able to find a group of people who already practice it in the park or other public place," Wang said. You'll see an instructor leading the group and that you can simply request to join them before "following the movements of the group as you try to imitate the whole form," she explained.

To make it more enjoyable and easier to commit to the practice longer term, "ask an interested friend or family member to start with you," Wang advised.

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