



# T'ai Chi for Arthritis

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## Introduction

Exercise is an essential part of many approaches to better health and control of arthritic conditions. Most medical experts agree that suitable exercises for arthritis should aim at improving flexibility, muscular strength and fitness. Several studies have shown the T'ai Chi for Arthritis program created by Dr Lam is effective and safe for people with arthritis.

T'ai Chi is a gentle exercise originated from ancient China. Not only is it proven consistently by scientific studies to improve flexibility, strength and fitness, it also delivers many other health benefits making it an eminently suitable exercise for arthritis.

These additional benefits includes: promoting correct body posture; integrating body, mind and spirit; improving internal energy (Qi); easy and inexpensive to learn and suitable for anyone. Most people who have done T'ai Chi enjoy it so much that the adherence rate is very high. There are numerous types of T'ai Chi, however a specially designed program for people with arthritis has many advantages.

## What is T'ai Chi?

T'ai Chi was originally a famous martial art from ancient China. Nowadays, it is practiced throughout the world as an effective exercise for health. It consists of fluid, gentle and graceful circular movements, relaxed and slow in tempo. Breathing is deepened and slowed, aiding visual and mental concentration, relaxing the body and allowing the life force or 'Qi' to flow unimpeded throughout the body. These techniques help to integrate the mind and body and allow the achievement of total harmony of the body and mind.

T'ai Chi can be practiced at almost anywhere and is suitable for anyone because its level of exertion can be adjusted to suit each person's physical condition. It combines deep diaphragmatic breathing with slow and gentle movements, while maintaining an upright posture. T'ai Chi places great emphasis on the mental training which enhances relaxation and serenity.

## Exercise for Arthritis

There is irrefutable evidence that exercise benefits for most aspects of health. Exercise is an essential part of therapeutic approach for arthritis. Pain and stiffness of the joints tend to discourage patients from exercising. However without exercise, joints can become even more stiff and painful. This happens because exercise actually keeps bones, muscles, and joints healthy.

It is important to keep muscles as strong as possible because the stronger the muscles and tissues around joints are, the better they will be able to support and protect those joints. If people do not exercise, their muscles become weaker, and their bones can become osteoporotic. Exercise pumps blood and body fluid through to the muscles, tendons and the joints, which will facilitate healing.

Studies after studies have shown the right exercises to relieve pain and improve quality of life for people with arthritis. A study of the T'ai Chi for Arthritis program was published by the Journal of Rheumatology (Sept 2003) has shown the Program to be effective and safe. A group of women with osteoarthritis (OA) did T'ai Chi for 12 weeks were compared to a control group, who received only standard treatment. The T'ai Chi group reported 30% less pain and 30% improvement in their abilities to carry out daily activities, as well as improved balance.

***In April 2007 the largest study of T'ai Chi for arthritis published on the Arthritis Care and Research Journal has shown the Dr Paul Lam's T'ai Chi for Arthritis program to be effective for arthritis.***

## What Are the Suitable Exercises?

Most medical experts agree that suitable exercises for arthritis should aim at improving flexibility, muscular strength and fitness. T'ai Chi not only does these; it also offers many other advantages:

### 1. Flexibility Exercises

These exercises reduce stiffness and help keep joints flexible. The range-of-motion is the normal amount joints can be moved in certain directions. Stiffness causes pain; therefore increase flexibility will help relieving pain.

T'ai Chi gently moves all joints, muscle and tendons throughout the body. Studies have shown T'ai Chi significantly increase flexibility. Doctors from University of Florida divided 46 patients, who suffer from rheumatoid arthritis, evenly into two groups of 23. One group undertook exercises that were derived from T'ai Chi and others act as control. The exercised group showed greater upper extremity range of motion after completing the program. The Atlanta (USA) FICSIT Group conducted an exciting study with a total of 200 participants (162

women and 38 men). The results indicated that T'ai Chi intervention impacted favorably on flexibility, strength and cardiovascular endurance, as well as a massive 47.5% decrease upon the occurrence of falls.

## **2. Muscle Strengthening Exercises**

These exercises help maintain or increase muscle strength. Strong muscles help keep the joints stable, therefore protecting them, minimizing future injury and reducing pain. Improved muscle strength enables you to do more.

Many well-known sport heroes suffered from osteoarthritis resulted from injuries. Yet they are able to perform at their peak levels because their strong muscles protect their joints. Studies have shown T'ai Chi to be effective in strengthening muscles by 15 to 20 %.

## **3. Fitness Exercises**

Fitness or cardio-respiratory exercises help strengthen the heart and lungs and increases stamina, which is important for maintaining health. Arthritic joint and tissues need a good supply of blood and oxygen for healing. Better circulation of blood, fluid and oxygen also helps to keep joints flexible and muscles strong.

T'ai Chi is a particularly effective fitness exercise. A interesting study involves 126 patients following acute myocardial infarct (heart attack). They were randomly assigned to T'ai Chi, aerobic exercise and a non-exercise support groups. The people from T'ai Chi group gain better cardiovascular fitness and lower blood pressure.

## **4. Correct Posture**

Many doctors believe correct body posture is important. When the posture is correct, there will be less inappropriate wear of the joints and muscles. When your posture is upright, the lung space is larger (try to take a big breath and straighten your chest, you will notice there is more space in the chest). The body works better in an upright posture.

A stooped body and drooping shoulders often associate with sadness, fear and negative emotion. Try to assume such a posture and you will most likely start having negative feelings.

## **More Reasons of T'ai Chi Being Effective for Arthritis**

### ***The Power of the Mind***

It is well know that positive mind power can help healing. T'ai Chi integrates body and mind, using the conscious mind to direct the internal force and the internal force to direct each movement. When practicing T'ai Chi one focuses on the movements and the co-ordination of the body. The mental training in T'ai Chi will enhance clarity of the mind, improve relaxation and uplift mood.

A recent review done by doctors from Stanford University on complementary and alternative treatments concludes that Mind-body techniques were found to be efficacious primarily as complementary and sometimes as stand-alone alternative treatments. Clearly the immense power of the mind has not been fully estimated. As one of the most powerful mind-body exercise, T'ai Chi teaches the student to be mindful of the intrinsic energy from which he or she can perceive greater self-control and empowerment.

Medical studies have found that T'ai Chi improves the mental state for people with arthritis

### ***The Power of Qi***

Qi is the life energy inside a person. This life energy comes from the combination of three things: the air breathed in through the lungs, essential Qi from the kidney and the Qi absorbed from food and water through the digestive system. Qi circulates throughout the body, performing many functions to maintain good health. The stronger Qi you have, the healthier and stronger you are.

The concept of Qi is a basic belief in most eastern cultures for thousands of years, acupuncture and Chinese medicine base their central theory on this concept. The gentle and slow movements of T'ai Chi opens up one's energy channels and keep them strong and supple; the rhythmic movements of the muscle, spine and joints pump energy through the whole body. T'ai Chi is one of the most effective exercises for Qi cultivation.

According to Chinese medicine, arthritis is caused by weak and sluggish flow of Qi. This is why for centuries Chinese doctors recommend T'ai Chi for people with arthritis.

### ***The Practical Advantages***

T'ai Chi is affordable, it does not requiring expensive equipment, special clothing or environment (for example, you need a pool for swimming). It is not weather dependent and can be a nice social event.

It is a progressive exercise in the sense that no matter at what age you start T'ai Chi, you can continue to improve your skill. The more one progresses the more intriguing and effective it becomes, T'ai Chi has great depth like peeling an onion. There is a layer inside another layer. This is why people enjoy practicing T'ai Chi.

For an exercise to benefit people, it has to be interesting and pleasurable. If no one likes to do a particular exercise, it becomes useless no matter how effective it is. Follow up studies have found many people have difficulties adhering to their exercises. As T'ai Chi teachers for many years we know many people enjoy practicing T'ai Chi and continue to come back year after year.