

## Introduction to Tai Chi and Qi Gong

### What are tai chi and qi gong?

Tai chi and qi gong are mind-body practices that have been used for thousands of years to promote health. Tai chi is one form of qi gong, but there are some differences in how they are practiced. Both target the energy of the body, traditionally called “qi” (pronounced “chee”), via focused breath and movements.

Tai chi means “Grand Ultimate Fist” in Chinese, and it has origins in various martial arts practices. Author of the *Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi*, Dr. Peter Wayne, describes tai chi practice in terms of “eight active ingredients:”<sup>1</sup>

1. Awareness: Tai chi practice develops focus and mindful awareness.
2. Intention: Tai chi practice actively uses images and visualization to enhance its health effects.
3. Structural Integration: Tai chi practice focuses on good posture and how a person positions the body. Good body positioning leads to better body function, and better function leads to better posture.
4. Active Relaxation: Tai chi practice is a form of moving meditation, using flowing and relaxing movements.
5. Strengthening and Flexibility: Tai chi uses slow movements that are done repetitively. Weight is shifted from leg-to-leg and different parts of the body are flexed and extended.
6. Natural, Freer Breathing: Tai chi practice teaches breathing skills, leading to many health benefits.
7. Social Support: Tai chi practice can involve being a part of a group class. This allows people to form community.
8. Embodied Spirituality: Tai chi practice allows the body, mind, and spirit to work together which helps a person focus on how they connect with others around them.

The “eight active ingredients” described for tai chi also apply to qi gong. Like tai chi, qi gong uses simple movements, but it also focuses on increasing and improving the flow of qi. There are many other types of qi gong in addition to those that use movement. Qi gong translates as “cultivation of life energy,” and in traditional Chinese medicine, “life energy” supports health and wellness.

The movements of qi gong are similar to tai chi in that they are slow, intentional, and coordinated with breath and/or focused attention. One difference is that qi gong postures are often performed standing in place or even while standing still.

## How can tai chi and qi gong benefit my health?

More research has focused on tai chi, but practicing either tai chi or qi gong will likely have the same benefits. Below are some examples of how tai chi and qi gong may help a patient with the different areas of the Circle of Health.

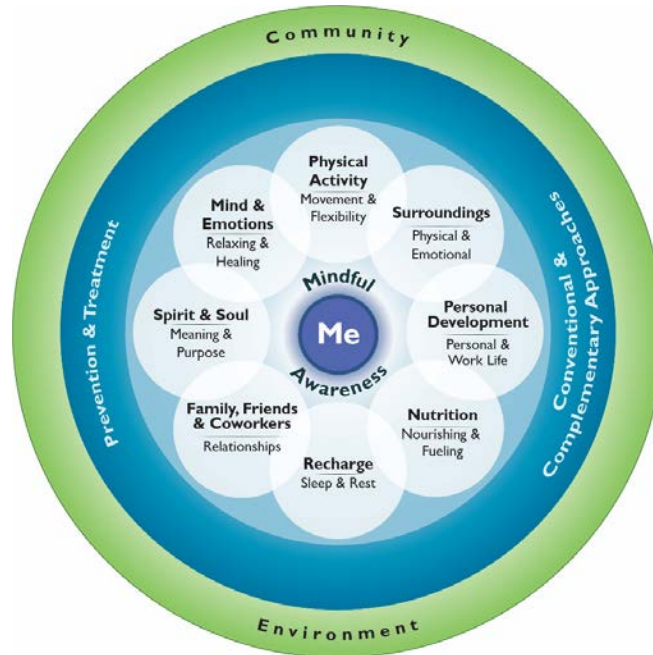


Figure 1. The Circle of Health.

### Physical Activity

Tai chi has been shown to improve health in many areas:<sup>2,3</sup>

- Balance
- Fall risk
- Physical fitness and muscle strength
- Flexibility
- Quality of life
- Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, two causes of joint pain and stiffness
- Blood pressure
- Cholesterol levels
- Promoting the ability to exercise in people with chronic heart failure
- Bone density (osteoporosis)
- Immune system health
- Quality of life in people with cancer
- Chronic pain
- Fibromyalgia symptoms

- Asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), including chronic bronchitis and emphysema

## Personal Development

Tai chi and qi gong may help people with their personal and work lives. Research points to tai chi improving self-confidence, self-esteem, and one's ability to achieve their goals.<sup>4</sup> These practices can make people feel like they have “come home”—like they have comfort in body, mind, and spirit. This supports personal development.

## Nutrition

Tai chi may affect people's eating habits. By connecting with their body, people become more in tune with feelings of hunger and/or thirst. They also begin to notice which foods and drinks make them feel the healthiest. This may be why studies have found tai chi improves blood sugar control.<sup>2</sup>

## Recharge

By using gentle exercise, healthy breathing, and deep relaxation, tai chi helps people sleep better. A recent study showed that tai chi improves sleep quality in healthy people as well as those with chronic diseases.<sup>5</sup>

## Family, Friends, & Coworkers

In the early morning, people gather in public parks throughout China to practice tai chi and qi gong. In other parts of the world, students gather to learn and practice together. This kind of group activity can lead to healthier relationships with family, friends, and coworkers. Research has shown that connecting with others promotes health.

## Spirit & Soul

The beauty of practicing tai chi comes from the graceful, flowing movements that spiral through the body. With dedication, students of tai chi begin to know this flow as an integration of body, mind, and spirit. Through continued practice, tai chi allows for clear insight into what gives a person a sense of meaning and purpose.

## Mind and Emotions

Tai chi and qi gong help people relax. They are great options for stress reduction. Studies have shown that these exercises improve depression, decrease negative thoughts, decrease anxiety in children with attention problems, lower stress levels, and improve thinking.<sup>2, 3</sup>

## How do I start practicing tai chi or qi gong?

Tai chi and qi gong are very safe exercises, though some people may experience minor muscle aches and pains from using muscles that haven't been exercised for a while.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is important to listen to and care for your body when doing these movements. If you feel tai chi or qi gong will help you achieve your health care goals, set aside time to practice. As with any activity, regular practice is what allows for better health.

## Where can I learn tai chi or qi gong?

Tai chi and qi gong are typically taught in groups. Classes may be held in martial arts schools, community centers, hospitals or clinics, and even at some public parks. One reliable source to find local classes is through the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association website (see below).

## What do I look for in a tai chi class or teacher?

If you are new to tai chi or qi gong, consider the following points when choosing a class:

- Look for a class that is “beginner,” “level 1,” or something similar.
- The smaller the class, the more likely the teacher will be able to give you personal guidance when needed. Classes of 10 students or less are ideal.
- How do you relate to the teacher? Sometimes it may take a few classes for you to learn the class pacing as well as teaching style. If, after 3 classes, you do not feel like the teacher or class environment is right for you, it may be time to try a different teacher or school.

## For you to consider:

- Are you interested in trying tai chi or qi gong, or doing it again if you have tried it in the past?
- What questions do you have for your health care team or a tai chi/qi gong teacher before you start?
- Based on what you know about the benefits of tai chi and qi gong, how do you think it might help you?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and well-being.**

## For more information

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
American Tai Chi and Qigong Association	Search engine for tai chi and qi gong schools throughout the United States; funded by National Institutes of Health	<a href="http://www.americantaichi.net/TaiChiQigongClass.asp">http://www.americantaichi.net/TaiChiQigongClass.asp</a>
Tai Chi for Beginners video	Tai chi and qi gong for beginners YouTube video by family doctor and tai chi researcher Dr. Paul Lam	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlOHGrYCEJ4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlOHGrYCEJ4</a>

This handout was adapted for the UW Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Vincent Minichiello MD, Assistant Professor and Integrative Health Physician, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a document for clinicians, Passport to Whole Health, written by Adam Rindfleisch, MD, MPhil.



## References

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