

Tai Chi For Arthritis

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese art for health and relaxation and is practised throughout the world as a form of exercise. Fluid, gentle movements are relaxed and slow in tempo and can be carried out almost anywhere, making it a suitable form of exercise for just about anyone.

An exercise program for people with arthritis should be designed to improve muscular strength, flexibility, and aerobic fitness. Tai chi can improve all of these components.

Tai chi facilitates the flow of the life energy, or Qi, through your body, performing many functions to maintain good health. It enhances both mental and physical relaxation, which is important in decreasing pain and stiffness as well as assisting in healing the body, and can improve your sense of wellbeing, which also has benefits for your body (pain and a negative mood have been shown to be related).

Paul Lam, a family physician in Sydney, is the president of Tai Chi Association of Australia and an internationally-respected tai chi teacher. He has produced many tai chi videos that have helped thousands of people improve their health and lifestyle. Tai Chi for Arthritis is a special program created in 1997 for people with arthritis by Dr Lam and a team of tai chi and medical experts. It is endorsed by Arthritis Australia, and over the past three years more than 1,000 instructors have been trained worldwide to teach this program.

HOW DOES TAI CHI WORK FOR ARTHRITIS?

Tai chi gently exercises all joints, muscles and tendons throughout the body. It contains both isometric (for example, pushing against a wall) and isotonic (for example, working with weights) exercises and is effective in strengthening muscles by around 15 to 20 percent. The improvement of cardio-respiratory fitness is also well documented.

Muscle strength is important for supporting and protecting joints, which will assist in decreasing pain and deformity. Muscle strength is also important for improving balance and the ability to perform every-day tasks such as getting out of a chair.

Flexibility exercises help to reduce pain and stiffness associated with musculoskeletal conditions. They also help minimise joint deformity and improve joint range of motion which makes movement easier and more efficient.

Aerobic fitness is important for overall health and fitness of your heart, lungs and muscles. Good aerobic fitness will allow for more efficient and easier performance of every day tasks such as climbing stairs or walking to the shops.

All state Arthritis Foundations in Australia and many overseas organisations have supported this program. Since 1998 Dr Paul Lam has travelled extensively to conduct instructors' workshops training physiotherapists, exercise instructors, rehabilitation therapists and tai chi instructors to teach the program. As a result, the trained instructors have conducted hundred of classes with excellent results. Many people with arthritis have gained health benefits and relief from their participation in the program.

HOW TO LEARN TAI CHI?

Tai chi can be easy to learn and quick to deliver health benefits. However, it should be approached as being a long-term exercise option for improving body and mind.

Step 1 - Introduction to tai chi

You can learn about tai chi through videos, books and articles. A well-produced video such as the 80-minute Tai Chi for Arthritis program designed for beginners is a good introduction. You can obtain this video from your local State/Territory Arthritis Office.

Step 2 - Find a good teacher

A good teacher will help you develop your capabilities. Choose your teacher carefully, one who understands your level of ability and interest. Your State/Territory Arthritis Office has list of tai chi instructors who teach this program and other styles of tai chi.

Step 3 - Practise regularly

As with all skills, "practice makes perfect". Practice and working with your teacher will ensure you develop the benefits and enjoyment of tai chi.

The Program

There are many forms of tai chi, so a specially designed program will maximise the potential benefit of tai chi for arthritis. Dr Lam's team has created a simple, safe and effective program for arthritis. Instructors of this program are trained to understand and take special care for people with arthritis.

The team consists of five tai chi experts headed by Dr Paul Lam and a panel of medical experts including Professor John Edmonds, Director of Rheumatology at St George Hospital in Sydney, Dr Ian Portek, a prominent rheumatologist and Guni Hinchey, a senior rheumatology physiotherapist.

The program is endorsed by Arthritis Australia. It includes warm-up, wind-down and a Qigong exercise for relaxation.

Instructors' Workshops

Most State/Territory Arthritis Offices have conducted two-day instructors' workshops in conjunction with Dr Lam since 1998 with great success. Hundreds of graduates have found high demand for their classes, and learners have gained relief from their pain and stiffness of arthritis as well as other health benefits.

Participants have gained guidance from Dr Lam, deeper understanding of tai chi, updated information and benefit of group interaction.

Pilot studies have shown 78 percent of people with arthritis who participated in the classes have gained significant relief and other health benefits after two months.

The workshops are suitable for:

- Exercise instructors
- Physiotherapists
- Rheumatology professionals
- Tai chi instructors and advanced tai chi students.

THE FUTURE

An exciting research project led by Professor John Edmonds, Marlene Fransen and Dr Paul Lam is expected to begin soon. This project will investigate the many benefits of the program, comparing it with hydrotherapy and a control group. The project will look into the quality of life, the improvement of aches and pain and the physical and mental health of people with arthritis.

MORE INFORMATION

If you require further information regarding the next Tai Chi for Arthritis Instructors Workshop, the self-teaching Tai Chi for Arthritis video or local Tai Chi classes, please phone Arthritis Australia on 1800 011 041.

For further information and details of local arthritis management and support programs contact your State/Territory Arthritis Office on 1800 011 041