

Tai Chi Relives Rheumatoid Arthritis Symptoms, How To Get Started

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Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis typically includes medications such as anti-inflammatory drugs and more potent medications that are associated with serious side effects. Some patients are interested in alternative treatments with fewer or no side effects, such as tai chi, which has demonstrated some significant benefits. Here is a review of recent findings to help you decide if you want to start tai chi.

Can tai chi relieve rheumatoid arthritis symptoms?

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese mind-body practice that has become relatively popular in the United States in recent years. Approximately 2.5 million people in the United States practice tai chi for health reasons, according to the National Health Interview Survey (2007), and there are many studies to support the benefits of this ancient practice.

Tai chi has several advantages that make it suitable for people of all ages and those who have some physical limitations.

- One, it is a gentle practice that does not involve sudden or vigorous movements.
- Two, it allows individuals to move at their own speed and is easily adaptable to a person's physical abilities.
- Three, it can help people improve balance, coordination, and flexibility, all of which are important for individuals who have rheumatoid arthritis ^[2], but are also beneficial for anyone.

With these benefits in mind, here are some of the latest findings regarding the

use of tai chi among people with rheumatoid arthritis [3].

The most recent report comes from *Current Rheumatology Reports* [4] and Tufts University School of Medicine. In his review, the author notes that tai chi "can be safely recommended to patients with...rheumatoid arthritis as a complementary and alternative medical approach to improve patient well-being."

Another recent study [5] evaluated the use of both tai chi and yoga as complementary therapies for rheumatic conditions. In the review, the author noted there is evidence that tai chi and yoga are helpful in the management of osteoarthritis of the knee [6], hand, and hip, and in rheumatoid arthritis. However, more evidence is needed before experts can recommend tai chi and yoga in rheumatic diseases.

A recent study in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* [7] reported on tai chi and ear acupuncture among individuals with rheumatoid arthritis. The study included 21 patients with rheumatoid arthritis who were randomly assigned to participate in either tai chi classes or to receive ear acupuncture along with tai chi twice a week for 12 weeks.

All the participants reported that they enjoyed the classes. At the end of the study, patients in both groups had experienced significant improvements in balance, grip and pinch strength, the ability to walk 50 feet, joint pain, number of swollen joints, tender joints, and pain. It did not appear that the use of ear acupuncture improved the effects of tai chi.

How to start tai chi

If you are interested in starting tai chi, you should first discuss it with your healthcare provider who is most familiar with your rheumatoid arthritis. Once you get the go-ahead, look for a tai chi teacher who has experience working with individual who have rheumatoid arthritis. While this is not absolutely necessary, it is helpful to work with a teacher who is aware of the possible limitations of people who have rheumatoid arthritis and who is sensitive to them.

Tai chi classes are often offered at senior centers, assisted living facilities,

community centers, fitness clubs, and by professionals at their own facilities. Check with your healthcare provider, local hospital, community aging agency, and local community directory for tai chi instructors in your area.

Tai chi does not require any special equipment or clothing, although you want to dress in comfortable attire, such as light sweats, shorts, and flat shoes or athletic shoes. The goal is to allow yourself to move freely and gently.

The bottom line

These three studies are representative of those available regarding the use of tai chi for patients who suffer with rheumatoid arthritis, and interested readers can find more if they search PubMed and other sources. The results suggest people who have rheumatoid arthritis can benefit from learning and practicing tai chi.

SOURCES:

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Image: Morguefile [8]

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