



The On-Line Edition of After 50
Newspaper for Western New York's
Young @ Heart
JUNE 2007

<http://www.after50news.com/index.html>

Tai Chi

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Tai Chi has increased in popularity over the last decade, particularly in the population of seniors, caregivers and those affected by chronic disease. Tai Chi consists of slow, graceful movements that are derived from a martial arts form in Oriental cultures. It is gentle in nature and well suited to young and old. Persons of all ages in China can be observed practicing tai chi in groups in urban parks and in front of congregate housing. In addition to improving flexibility, tai chi is conducted with a lowered center of gravity (knees and hips held in flexion) and can contribute to lower extremity strength-building, body awareness and balance control.

Tai chi benefits are numerous and include stress reduction, core strengthening, mobility maintenance, falls prevention, mental calmness, and even pain management. Of particular interest is that caregivers who are in a stressful situation finding balance between caring for someone and maintaining a healthy mental and physical perspective can take advantage of a recently available DVD that may offer the opportunity to de-stress in one's own home and at a time best convenient to individual schedules.

Balance issues emerge slowly and subtly over the life cycle, beginning in the mid 40's and becoming obvious by the mid 60's. Losing one's balance is a major contributor to falling, and each year about a third of persons over age 65 and older experience a fall, as do about half of the persons over age 80. Even the fear of losing one's balance can curtail activity, and this strategy can be particularly counterproductive.

Less activity leads to more weakness, and more weakness to more falls.

In terms of balance control, two rigorously controlled studies- part of a 3 year exercise research project sponsored by the National Institutes of Aging and the National Institute for Nursing Research- support the contention that tai chi has very favorable effects upon the prevention of falls. One tai chi group endured 48% longer than a comparison group before a first fall. By practicing tai chi movements, older participants learn to stabilize their balance and regain it before they begin to fall.

It is important to remind older adults that loss of balance can be due to a number of conditions in addition to the physical losses that accumulate through a sedentary lifestyle. These conditions include problems with the inner ear, medications, poor posture resulting from arthritis or osteoporosis, poor vision, and muscle weakness. To rule out these problems, consult a health professional.

A local physical therapist, instructor and expert in the art of Tai chi is Dr Penny Klein from D'Youville College. She has published a DVD entitled "Chi For You, Two,...or More. It is an easy to follow set of exercises that can be applied in the privacy of your own home or in any number of settings such as multi level care residences, employee health fitness centers, Alzheimer/Dementia units, or sports programs. It can help maintain a healthful living situation by balancing the needs of both caregiver and care recipient.

A very interesting program that Dr Klein teaches is a Taiji Buddies class for individuals with Parkinson's disease and/or other chronic conditions that limit mobility and activity tolerance. It is a great support for caregivers and promotes the growing body of scientific literature aimed at enabling caregivers to continue in their role in maintaining loved ones in the home community for as long as possible. For information on this group or the DVD available for purchase, contact Dr Klein at kleinj@dyc.edu.