HEALTH BASICS

Tai chi and qi gong

Tai chi and qi gong are gentle practices combining movement, breathing, posture, and focused attention.

WHAT IT IS
Gentle practices combining movement, breathing, posture, and focused attention

WHERE IT COMES UP
Exercise classes, rehabilitation, fall prevention, and stress-management programs

WHY IT MATTERS
May support balance, mobility, and wellbeing for some people

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or replacement for medical care

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, physiotherapist, or qualified instructor

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No diagnostic test; progress can be tracked with personal goals

Overview

Tai chi and qi gong are traditional Chinese practices that combine physical movement with breathing and focused attention. Both can be adapted for different ages and levels of mobility.

Tai chi developed partly as a martial art. Most health-focused classes use slow, flowing sequences rather than fighting techniques. You may shift your weight, turn, bend your knees, and move your arms through set patterns.

Qi gong, also written as qigong, is a broader group of practices. It may include repeated movements, held postures, breathing exercises, meditation, or self-massage. Some forms are performed standing, while others can be done sitting or lying down. Tai chi is sometimes described as one form of qi gong.

In traditional Chinese thought, "qi" refers to a type of vital energy. Modern science has not established qi as a measurable biological substance. Research instead examines the practices as forms of physical activity, balance training, breathing, relaxation, and attention.

Tai chi and qi gong are not diseases, diagnoses, or medical treatments on their own. They may be used as part of an exercise or rehabilitation plan, but they should not replace care for an injury or health condition.

How it works

A typical session begins with gentle warming up. The instructor may then teach individual movements or a sequence called a form. Movements are usually repeated slowly, with attention to posture and breathing.

Tai chi challenges balance by asking you to shift your body weight from one leg to the other. It may also involve turning, stepping in different directions, and controlling how quickly you move. With regular practice, these tasks may train balance, coordination, leg strength, and confidence in movement.

Qi gong may place less emphasis on stepping through a long sequence. Some practices use simple repeated arm movements or stationary postures. Slow breathing and focused attention may help reduce physical tension and create a sense of calm.

The intensity is usually light to moderate, but it is not the same in every class. Deep knee bends, long sessions, or difficult one-leg positions can require substantial strength and balance. Seated or supported versions require less.

Research cannot always separate the effects of movement, breathing, concentration, the instructor, and social contact. Benefits may come from several of these features working together.

Why it matters for your health

Tai chi is one type of activity studied for improving balance and reducing falls among older adults. Exercise reviews support balance and functional training as part of fall-prevention programs, although results depend on the program and the people taking part.[3,4] A large clinical trial also found that a specially designed tai ji quan program reduced falls in older adults at high risk compared with a stretching program.[6]

Tai chi may help some people with knee or hip osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis is a joint condition that can cause pain and stiffness. The American College of Rheumatology and Arthritis Foundation includes tai chi among the recommended approaches for knee or hip osteoarthritis.[5] It does not rebuild damaged cartilage, and individual results differ.

Tai chi and qi gong are also studied for stress, mood, sleep, long-term pain, and quality of life. Some findings are encouraging, but studies often use different styles, session lengths, and outcome measures. Many are too small or too short to give firm answers.[1,2]

These practices may count toward your physical activity, depending on how actively you move. They may not provide enough aerobic activity or muscle strengthening to meet all of your

exercise needs. Aerobic activity raises your heart and breathing rate; muscle-strengthening activity makes muscles work against resistance.

The most useful question is often whether the practice helps you meet a specific goal, such as moving more comfortably, feeling steadier, or developing a regular activity routine.

What can go wrong

Tai chi and qi gong are generally considered low-impact activities. However, low impact does not mean risk-free. Poorly matched movements can lead to muscle soreness, joint pain, strains, or loss of balance.

Deep knee bends may aggravate knee symptoms. Repeated twisting may be uncomfortable after a joint injury or operation. Standing on one leg without support can increase fall risk for someone who is already unsteady. An instructor should be able to offer smaller movements, a higher stance, a chair, or other support.

Feeling mildly warm or noticing gentle muscle effort can be expected during activity. Pain that is sharp, increasing, or causing you to change how you walk is a reason to stop and arrange routine clinical advice. Persistent dizziness, repeated near-falls, or pain lasting after several sessions also deserves routine follow-up.

Seek urgent assessment for a serious fall, a new deformity, or an injury that prevents you from putting weight on a limb.

Stop exercising and seek emergency help for chest pressure, fainting, severe trouble breathing, or sudden weakness on one side of the body. These are not normal effects of tai chi or qi gong.

Be cautious about claims that these practices can diagnose disease, replace medicines, or cure serious conditions. "External qi" treatments, in which someone claims to direct energy toward another person, are different from doing a movement practice. Evidence has not established them as substitutes for medical care.

What you can do

Choose a class that matches your current mobility and goals. A beginner class should teach movements gradually rather than expecting you to follow a complex sequence straight away. Ask whether the instructor has experience adapting movements for joint pain, disability, balance problems, or recovery after surgery.

Before joining, useful questions include:

If you have had a recent operation, repeated falls, exercise-related chest symptoms, or a condition that limits safe movement, ask your clinician or physiotherapist what level of activity is suitable. This is routine planning, not usually an emergency.

There is no blood test, scan, or medical examination that measures whether tai chi or qi gong is "working." Instead, choose a practical goal and keep a simple record. You might track how often you practise, whether you need support while stepping, the number of falls or near-falls, or how easily you perform a regular task.

Wear comfortable clothing and use stable footwear if shoes are worn in the class. Practise on a clear, non-slip surface. Keep a chair or rail within reach if you are unsteady, and avoid practising difficult balance movements alone.

- Can the movements be done seated or with a chair nearby?
- Are deep bends, fast turns, or one-leg positions optional?
- How does the instructor respond if a movement causes pain?
- Is the class focused on exercise, martial arts, meditation, or rehabilitation?

Common questions

Are tai chi and qi gong the same?

They overlap but are not identical. Qi gong is a broad category of movement, breathing, and attention practices. Tai chi usually uses linked movement sequences and has roots in martial arts.

Do I need to believe in qi?

No. You can use either practice as movement, balance training, breathing practice, or relaxation. Scientific research does not require qi to be treated as a measurable substance.

Can I practise while sitting?

Yes. Many movements can be adapted for a chair. Seated practice may support breathing, attention, posture, and upper-body movement, but it provides less standing balance training.

Can tai chi replace physiotherapy or prescribed exercise?

Not automatically. A physiotherapy program may target a specific weakness, injury, or movement problem. Tai chi can sometimes complement that plan if the movements are appropriate.

How quickly should I expect results?

There is no single timetable. Programs studied in research differ in frequency, length, style, and teaching. Judge progress against a realistic personal goal rather than promises made by a class or product.

Sources

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