

Tai Chi Gaining Ground as Optimal Exercise for Elderly

By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A new take on the ancient martial art Tai Chi may offer a gentle way for even frail elderly adults to keep moving.

The style, known as Tai Chi Fundamentals, combines the traditions of the Chinese practice along with modern therapeutic principles to form an exercise plan feasible for elderly adults with a range of health problems -- from arthritis to heart disease.

"It's a simplified version of Tai Chi," said Dr. Sandra Matsuda, an assistant professor of occupational therapy at the University of Missouri-Columbia and one of only about 15 practitioners in the U.S. specifically certified in Tai Chi Fundamentals (TCF).

The program is part of a growing recognition in the U.S. and other Western nations of the potential health benefits of Tai Chi, particularly for older adults who cannot perform higher-impact exercise.

Long used in China as a way to promote wellness, Tai Chi focuses on building strength, balance and flexibility through slow, fluid movements combined with mental imagery and deep breathing. Studies have suggested that the elderly can reduce their risk of falls, lower their blood pressure and ease arthritis symptoms through the practice, and some research indicates Tai Chi can improve heart and blood vessel function in both healthy people and those with heart conditions.

"It's the regular practice of Tai Chi that makes it beneficial," Matsuda told Reuters Health. Making the practice accessible through a simplified style like TCF or through free classes at community senior centers, for example, should help older people stick with it.

Writing in the March issue of the Rehab Management Journal, Matsuda and her co-authors, including one of the developers of TCF, Tricia Yu, describe how various rehabilitation therapists in the U.S. are using the program to help older patients with chronic illnesses.

The exercise, according to the Matsuda and her colleagues, can be beneficial for a range of patients, including those who are recovering from total knee replacement or who have cardiovascular or lung conditions, given that instructors are properly trained in the needs of elderly adults with health limitations.

A local senior center, Matsuda said, would be a good place for older people to start looking for an appropriate class.

Like traditional Tai Chi, TCF is intended to promote well-being, not just aid in rehabilitation, according to Matsuda. In general, Tai Chi seems particularly suited to helping reduce the risk of falls -- a major cause of disabling injury among the elderly - because it helps improve balance and coordination.

"It offers a way to be confident in your movement," Matsuda said.

One recent study of frail men and women between 70 and 90 years old, many of whom relied assistive devices to get around, found that regular Tai Chi lessons cut the risk of falls by 25 percent.

"The time to treat falls," Matsuda said, "is not after people have broken bones."

SOURCE: Rehab Management Journal, March 2005.