

Tai Chi....something old but now new for seniors

In 1983 I visited Japan, a small section of China and Hong Kong. China was particularly an interesting cultural experience as it was still a “closed” society and almost no Chinese had contact with anyone outside of their own area of China. I do remember vividly looking out of my hotel room window the first morning and seeing a few hundred Chinese doing what later I learned was Tai Chi or Tai Chi Chuan. All appeared to be male, most were at least middle age but all appeared to be doing a dance in slow motion. It was a series of graceful, slow, choreographed movements...almost mesmerizing.

There is some debate about how long the Chinese have practiced Tai Chi as some think it is only 600 years whereas others believe it may be 2500 years. Most researchers agree it is a Chinese martial art that descends from Qigong, an ancient Chinese discipline tied to traditional Chinese medicine. Its origin was for self defense and as a means to enhance inner calm and peace. Essentially Qigong includes breathing, the mind and movements in a combination which will result in a natural balance of energy. Today there are many forms and names for variations of Tai Chi.

Although Tai Chi has been around for centuries it has been rather recent that research has been done in the United States regarding the health benefits of Tai Chi for those of us at least 50 years old. A few years ago the Mayo Clinic reported in one of their public newsletters that although more research is needed, current evidence supports that Tai Chi offers numerous benefits including:

- Stress reduction
- Balance, flexibility and muscle strength improvement
- Anxiety and depression reduction
- Blood pressure lowered
- Sleep quality improved
- Chronic pain relieved
- Cardiovascular fitness enhanced
- Falls by older adults reduced
- Energy, endurance and agility increased
- Overall feelings of well-being improved
- Mental concentration enhanced

Today, Tai Chi is the most popular form of exercise in the world. It is also becoming very popular with seniors as it is low impact exercise, has no negative effects on our joints, and is safe even for those with rheumatoid arthritis as it does not trigger joint inflammation. Basically, the Tai Chi classes offered to seniors are a noncompetitive, self-paced system of gentle physical exercises and stretching routines. To do Tai Chi you perform a series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner. Each posture flows into the next ensuring that your body is in constant motion. The intensity of Tai Chi can vary depending on the form or style practiced or

the person teaching the sessions. It is also appealing because it is relatively inexpensive, requires no special equipment and can be done indoors or outdoors, in a group or you can do it individually with music or a DVD.

Balance and breathing, two tasks made more difficult to maintain as we age, are major focuses in Tai Chi. A regular routine of at least two or three times per week will strengthen these attributes. And certainly Tai Chi, as well as other forms of exercise, doesn't only provide physical health benefits as the group social interaction is fun and can decrease boredom, stress, tension, and depression.

Because Tai Chi had its origins as a form of martial arts or defense training, many seniors may not even consider it. Modern Tai Chi sessions for seniors do not usually include kicking, striking, use of weapons or physical combat techniques. This is a common misconception. Scientists at the Oregon Research Institute report that Tai Chi offers the greatest benefits to older men and women who are basically healthy but relatively inactive. Tai Chi teachers are now also developing a version for people in wheelchairs. One of the best things about Tai Chi is that people enjoy it so they are more likely to stick with it long enough to benefit. It always helps when something that is good for us is also enjoyable!

Would you like to learn more about Tai Chi? Would you like to try some simple Tai Chi movements with a qualified teacher? You can have the opportunity to be introduced to Tai Chi with Rob Donovan, owner of Tai Chi Awakenings on Friday, June 17th if you attend the "Bits and Bites" session sponsored by the Delta College 50+...*Just like Gold Program*. Every month these sessions (the format is a bit of information along with a bite to eat) introduce topics of interest to the 50+ population. Advance registration is required so we can have an accurate food count. The June 17th meeting will be held at the Delta College Planetarium & Learning Center in downtown Bay City. You are invited to join us as we learn about Tai Chi together!

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