

Tai Chi Improves Balance & Cognition

by [Cody Sipe, PhD](#)

Why tai chi? In recent years, study after study has proven its benefits, yet most [fitness professionals](#) seem to know little about it. That's too bad, because just about any fitness client can learn tai chi, and any fitness professional can teach it. Like other types of exercise, [tai chi](#) simply requires you to learn its movements.

Tai chi is beneficial at any age, but it's a great fit for aging exercisers because it improves balance and enhances cognitive function, and both these outcomes decrease the risk of falls and boost overall well-being. If you master and ultimately teach tai chi, you can develop a competitive edge in appealing to this client demographic. Read on to learn what you need to know.

A Proven Choice for Seniors

Scientists have extensively studied the benefits of [tai chi](#). Just since 2010, more than 50 systematic reviews (including meta-analyses) published in scientific journals have documented tai chi's value for elderly people at risk of falls. Tai chi has also been found to help cancer survivors (Miller & Taylor-Piliae 2014), Parkinson's patients (Hackney & Wolf 2014) and others living with a broad spectrum of diseases and health conditions.

Let's look more deeply at just a couple of the documented benefits for senior clients:

Balance and fall risk. The evidence suggests tai chi is an efficient, cost-effective way to improve static and dynamic balance, reduce fear of falling and potentially decrease the prevalence of falls in [elderly](#) people (Jimenez-Martin et al. 2013; Leung et al. 2011; Hackney & Wolf 2014; Liu & Frank 2010). Researchers caution that tai chi may not be as beneficial for frail and severely deconditioned older adults because they cannot perform the movements with sufficient intensity and duration to achieve significant protection against falls. Even so, a review in the American Journal of Chinese Medicine concluded that tai chi was more effective than other measures for preventing falls in at-risk populations (del-Pino-Casado, Obrero-Gaitan & Lomas-Vega 2016).

Cognition. Tai chi can improve cognition in [older adults](#) (Wu et al. 2013; Zheng et al. 2015; Wayne et al. 2014; Miller & Taylor-Piliae 2014). Cognition includes executive function, language, learning and memory. Executive function is an umbrella term for a range of cognitive processes, including attention, working memory, problem-solving, processing speed, mental flexibility and other tasks. Although it is difficult to pin down exactly how tai chi improves cognition, it appears that practicing the movements can significantly enhance global and executive functioning in people with either no or mild cognitive impairment and may protect against cognitive decline.

We'll need more research to understand how tai chi can do the most good for the most people. Studies published to date have not established the optimum number of forms or the optimum session duration or frequency. Nevertheless, the research clearly suggests

that for older exercisers, tai chi should be one piece of an overall exercise program that includes individualized aerobic and [strength training](#).

The Core Principles of Tai Chi

To learn tai chi, you need to understand several principles that trace to its roots as a centuries-old Chinese martial art. What started as a fast-moving combat technique had evolved by the 19th century into the slow, [movement-meditation](#) style we practice today (Bailey 2016). Of the handful of tai chi varieties, the most popular is the short-form, 24-movement Yang style (the full form has 108 movements).

Each of the varieties embodies core tai chi principles: columns; rotation; rooted and grounded; substantial and insubstantial; dan tian; and regulation. Here's a quick look at each of them:

Columns. This principle emphasizes proper posture. Tai chi recognizes three columns—one runs from the top of your head through the center of your body, and the other two run from the shoulders through the hips. The idea is that you imagine being suspended from the ceiling, and everything falls naturally into alignment. While performing the forms (movements), you practice keeping your columns “intact” to maintain proper postural alignment.

Rotation. Proper rotation occurs along the central axis of the spine to maintain alignment. Tai chi trains the body to rotate properly and to involve the entire body—not just the limbs—in a movement.

Rooted and grounded. This concept encourages [stability](#) by maintaining firm contact with the ground. It begins with relaxing the body in all the postures and sinking into each posture as deeply as you can. “Rooted” does not mean glued to the ground: You should still have fluid movement throughout the form.

[IDEA Fit Tips](#), Volume 16, Issue 6

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