

Ask the Expert: Tai Chi Exercise may Help Seniors Avoid Falls

Steve Ditlea | April 11, 2017

Question: Recent studies show that practicing traditional Chinese tai chi movements can reduce falls in seniors. But isn't this really hard to learn?

Answer: Depends on your goal. Researchers at China's Guangzhou Sport University analyzed up-to-date studies and found that tai chi's centuries-old exercises can lessen falls in those over the age of 65, by close to a third. Complex to learn in depth, tai chi at its most basic can offer rapid benefits for movement and balance.

Expert: Cherie Barnier has been teaching tai chi in Poughkeepsie for over a quarter century.

Now retired from accepting new students, she still leads regular classes at the Cunneen-Hackett Arts Center, with students who have been in motion with her some 10 to 24 years. Barnier teaches the Yang-style long form of tai chi, a sequence of 108 precise, flowing movements — the most popular style of this exercise worldwide. She acknowledges that briefer, less formal versions taught in the region in health clubs and martial arts studios can be helpful too.

It's not about difficulty, but perseverance and dedication to regular practice of tai chi's balanced motions, she explains.

"It may take over a year to learn the whole long form," Barnier says, "but if you just want to play with tai chi, you can do that too. The differences are immediate in people learning it. Tai chi makes you more aware of your body in motion. With the basics of tai chi, you learn body alignment, you learn how to shift your weight as you move. We work on relaxation so that your weight sinks down to your feet, so you're well-rooted and not top-heavy—that's a common problem in falls."

"What's so beautiful about tai chi is that you can do it a little or you can do it a lot and learn important life lessons. You can dabble or delve deeply. If you just want to come do tai chi once a week and play a little, that's good because it can be a beneficial social exercise."



There is evidence that Tai Chi can help prevent falls

She adds: “Tai chi is great for seniors because it expands their awareness of their surroundings. It teaches you to pay attention to how you’re moving through space. If you’re not paying attention, doesn’t matter how much you know, you’re going to fall. I’m 66. I’ve had a couple of falls. You’re not going to totally avoid falls. But I’ve avoided injury.”

For anyone seeking a tai chi class, there are many more options nearby than when she began.



Practice of Tai Chi Chuan in the park: detail of hand positions

“In 1980 I saw something on television showing these people moving in a flowing way and I was so attracted to it that I had to pursue it. Back then it was difficult to find places that taught tai chi. I started out in Saugerties at a studio there. I studied with grandmasters from China who would come to the States.”

It turned into a decades-long pursuit. “I’ve been teaching for 28 years. I started out in adult education. Basically all my teaching has been in Poughkeepsie and at Bard for a while and at Vassar, as well as my own classes.”

She won’t recommend any specific class open to beginners in the area now, but urges the tai-chi-curious to look for a program they find comfortable. “What you learn in class you have to practice on your own. Even with the simplified forms that are easier to learn, you will still have to apply yourself.”