

The Following article was on USA Today on-line August 18, 2010



Tai chi may ease fibromyalgia pain

By [Liz Szabo](#), USA TODAY

Tai chi, an ancient Chinese practice of exercise and meditation, may relieve symptoms of a painful chronic condition called fibromyalgia, a small new study shows.

Tai chi involves gentle, flowing movements in which students shift their weight and breathe deeply, cycling through a series of stances with poetic names, such as "white crane spreads its wings." The philosophy of tai chi involves moving a person's vital energy, or *qi* ("chee"), through the body.

In the study, doctors randomly assigned 66 fibromyalgia patients to take either a 12-week tai chi class or attend a "wellness education" class that included stretching exercises, according to a study in today's [New England Journal of Medicine](#). Fibromyalgia patients experience pain, stiffness, fatigue and other problems.

All participants attended two hour-long classes a week and had instructions to practice at home 20 minutes a day. Most were women with an average age of 50, and most were overweight.

After finishing the course, 79% of tai chi participants said their symptoms had improved, compared with 39% of those in the educational class, the study shows. It was financed by the National Center for Complementary and [Alternative Medicine](#), a branch of the [National Institutes of Health](#).

Tai chi students reported improvements in mood, sleep, quality of life and their ability to exercise.

Even three months after the classes ended, 82% of tai chi students still felt better, compared with 53% of the comparison group, the study says.

A study in 2007 from the National Institutes of Health found that 2.3 million American adults had used tai chi in the past year.

In an accompanying editorial, [Harvard Medical School's](#) Gloria Yeh and others note that the study had limitations. Yeh notes that researchers don't know which aspects of tai chi were most helpful: the exercise, deep breathing, relaxation exercise, meeting new friends or learning from a charismatic teacher.

Because all students knew which type of class they were taking, it's possible that tai chi could act like a placebo, so patients improved simply because they expected to.

Yeh suggests conducting a larger, longer study — with multiple teachers, at different locations, perhaps comparing it with yoga and other therapies — to really understand tai chi's benefits.

But Callahan notes that tai chi has few drawbacks. Even the cost of a class, which can top \$50 a month, is modest compared with the cost of many medications. And unlike drugs, tai chi had no harmful side effects, she says.