Why Tai Chi may Be One of the Best Exercises for Fibromyalgia

by KATARINA ZULAK

Tai Chi For Fibromyalgia: One of the Best Types of Exercise for Improving Pain and Fatigue

Exercise is hard when you have fibromyalgia. Aerobic activity is the most commonly prescribed non-drug treatment for managing fibromyalgia. However, for many with this condition, moderate aerobic activity causes flare-ups, making it impossible to engage in this form of exercise on a regular basis. Tai chi offers an alternative exercise option, that is appealing because of its gentle and slow format.

I have to admit that I initially associated tai chi as the type of exercise that was most appropriate for elderly people. Like a lot of other things that I have had to revise, I have learned that this stereotype is just not true. You can enjoy the benefits at any age!

I particularly like tai chi for fibromyalgia because the entire program involves standing, not transitioning from lying to sitting to standing which other exercise forms like yoga tend to do. With my back pain, I find gentle standing exercise to be easier on my body. There are also seated tai chi DVDs and classes available if that is better for you.

It's nice to learn an entirely new way of moving – it feels like a new skill rather than a simplified version of the type of exercise I could do before I developed fibromyalgia. Although it is very gentle, I can feel afterward in my shoulders and mid back that I have been exercising (but not pain).

What is Tai Chi?

Practicing tai chi involves performing a series of movements while paying attention to the body and staying aware of the breath. The exercises are especially effective for developing balance, focus, coordination and graceful, centered movement. You can think of tai chi as a slow-motion martial art.

Tai chi, often described as "meditative movement," is classified as a form of exercise that improves flexibility and range of motion – lengthening tight muscles and moving joints through the full span of movement they are intended to achieve.

How Can Tai Chi for Fibromyalgia Help? Exploring the Benefits

Last year, researchers compared the benefits of aerobic exercise and tai chi to improving fibromyalgia symptoms. The study found that tai chi results in better outcomes for patients with fibromyalgia than aerobic exercise, by improving pain, physical function, morning tiredness, mental health and fatigue. Participants engaged in either one or two 60-minute, Yang-Style tai chi classes per week or group aerobic classes for 24 weeks. Importantly, participants were more likely to show up for tai chi classes than aerobic classes, meaning that it was easier for many individuals to actually incorporate tai chi into their week than aerobic exercise.

A 2010 study found that 12 weeks of tai chi reduced fibromyalgia symptoms and improved quality of life.

Compared to a control group who received wellness education and stretching exercises, the participants who practiced tai chi reported less pain and fatigue as well as improved sleep, mental health and overall physical health. In fact, for the majority of patients, the benefits of practicing tai chi for managing fibromyalgia were greater than the benefits reported for fibromyalgia drugs in treatment trials!

In 2016, a randomized, controlled trial of 350 participants found that the Tai Chi for arthritis program, created by Dr. Paul Lam and the Arthritis Foundation, was effective for significant pain relief, less stiffness and an improved ability to manage daily living in individuals with all types of arthritis. Importantly, this and other studies show that tai chi can improve balance, which is a difficult symptom for many people who have fibromyalgia.

Starting Tai Chi for Fibromyalgia: Where to Begin

In the U.S., you can search for a tai chi class in your area by going to the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association website (which is funded by the U.S. National Library of Medicine). In Canada, you can search for the Tai Chi for Health classes offered by the Taoist Tai Chi Society

For some people, going out to a weekly class is too difficult, and this can be a significant barrier for getting regular exercise. That's where instructional DVDs come in! The Tai Chi for Arthritis program, created by Dr. Paul Lam and the Arthritis Foundation, is an evidenced-based at-home program that relieves pain, improves quality of life and prevents falls. I really enjoy this instructional program and find it a great way to loosen up in the morning and prepare for the day.