

Tai Chi reduces imbalance in Parkinson's patients

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In the Feb 9 issue of [New England Journal of Medicine](#), *Tai Chi and Postural Stability in Patients with Parkinson's Disease* presents a study result that Tai chi training appears to reduce balance impairments in patients with mild-to-moderate Parkinson's disease, with additional benefits of improved functional capacity and reduced falls.

Funded by [the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke](#), this randomized, controlled research on 195 Parkinson's Disease patients shows that with one-hour Tai Chi class twice a week for 24 weeks, patients have significant improvements in reducing balance impairments especially in comparison with the patients who had the resistance or stretching training.

The group what had Tai Chi training also performed better than the stretching group in all secondary outcomes and outperformed the resistance-training group in stride length and functional reach. Tai chi

lowered the incidence of falls as compared with stretching but not as compared with resistance training.

Fu Zhong Li of the **Oregon Research Institute** is an expert of Exercise Science and the lead research scientist of this new study. According to him, PD patients normally suffer from postural instability, tremors, rigidity in the trunk and limbs, and slow movement due to worsening ability of coordination. Tai Chi is a whole body exercise. Once one part of the body moves, the entire body moves. The upper body and lower body are synchronized during movements. Li explained in a telephone interview that “it is like standing on a moving bus, when the bus turns a corner or changes speed, people need to shift weight to remain balanced. That’s how Tai Chi works.” Li further stated that Tai Chi movements like Single Whip and Parting Wild Horse Mane require complicated whole body coordination, and Cloud Hands demands head and eye coordination as well. The practice of Tai Chi helps PD patients to maintain or develop better coordination ability, improve postural control, improve walking ability, and make their bodies less stiff. There is no medication to stop tremors and there is no evidence at this point that Tai Chi can help to reduce tremors either. What is also impressive is that the effects of Tai Chi training were maintained at 3 months even after the intervention. No serious adverse events were observed in the research.

Fu Zhong Li mentioned that the training protocol used in the research is a set of eight movements modified and to some degree simplified from the Yang Style Tai Chi 24 forms to meet the PD patients’ condition. These movements are mainly focusing on weight shifting and base support. Tai Chi is a slow movement exercise and seemingly effortless, but it contains resistance and stretching training components.

The health benefits of Tai Chi have been medically proven through numerous studies. Washington University in St. Louis completed a study in a small scale in 2008 recognizing “Tai Chi appears to be an appropriate, safe and effective form of exercise for some individuals with mild-moderately severe PD”. Nevertheless, this is the second time that *the New England Journal of Medicine* published the health benefits of Tai Chi after the publication of Tuff University’s Dr. ChenChen Wang’s research on Fibromyalgia patients in 2008. Mainstream media like *CNN*, *ABC News*, *CBS News*, *NBC News*, *US News and World Report* all reported on this important study today, even *BusinessWeek* also picked up the story, not to mention *WebMD*. We certainly hope that this will raise the awareness of Tai Chi on health among the general population.

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