

Tai chi gentle on diabetes

by Fran Molloy

Tai chi may help people with type 2 diabetes improve their physical and mental wellbeing, say Australian researchers.

Published 09/10/2008



Grasping a sparrow's tail doesn't work up as much of a sweat as it sounds.

That's the beauty of the ancient Chinese martial art of tai chi. Based on a series of sets of gentle exercises with names like 'grasp the sparrows tail' and 'part the wild horse's mane', tai chi may benefit people with type 2 diabetes, say Australian researchers.

They compared blood sugar levels, blood pressure and other health measures for 25 patients who attended formal tai chi classes over a six-month period to those of a control group who did no formal exercise.

The study, published this month in *Australian Family Physician*, used standardised quality of life tests and reported that the group attending tai chi classes scored a significant improvement in both their social and their physical functioning. They also had lowered cholesterol levels compared to the control group.

However, the researchers from the University of New South Wales, admit the intensity and duration of the gentle tai chi exercise program wasn't sufficient to make a big difference to blood sugar levels and blood pressure.

But they argue that tai chi has higher levels of adherence than many other types of exercise. As it is non-competitive and levels are increased

slowly, it is suitable for sedentary, overweight or disabled people, making it a good choice for those daunted by more strenuous programs.

A good first step

It has long been recognised that regular exercise has a positive impact on diabetes.

"Apart from genetic influences, physical inactivity and poor diet are the biggest causes of type 2 diabetes," says Bronwyn Penny, who is an accredited exercise physiologist at Diabetes Australia NSW.

"From a diabetes management point of view, exercise should form a major cornerstone in controlling the condition."

But a large proportion of adults with type 2 diabetes don't follow activity guidelines, which recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise at least five times a week.

Penny says many diabetics are overweight or obese and associated arthritis and other conditions may make it difficult for people with these conditions to exercise.

"Tai chi and other forms of gentle exercise can be a great stepping stone to getting people more active," Penny says.

In the long-term, however, she believes people with diabetes need more intense exercise than tai chi to sustain good blood glucose control.

"We know that moderate to vigorous exercise will have a better impact on managing and controlling diabetes, however for a lot of people, tai chi can be an effective start."

Body and mind

Study co-author Dr Paul Lam is a Sydney-based GP, lecturer in community medicine at the University of New South Wales and a tai chi master.

Lam has seen a rapid increase in diabetes patients in his own practice, and says that despite most doctors recommending exercise to manage type 2 diabetes, many people with diabetes lead a sedentary lifestyle and are less likely to adhere to regular exercise.

"It's a vicious circle, many diabetics don't enjoy exercise because they're

not very good at sports or they're not very co-ordinated, so they don't do it and then end up being even less co-ordinated."

Tai chi can help people with diabetes many ways, says Lam.

"It's not just the exercise, people are also learning to relax and improve their ability to handle stress, they get social reinforcement from sharing an enjoyable experience with others and it also nurtures community spirit."

Tai chi can help improve flexibility as well as have other mental health benefits, says Dr Pat Phillips, senior director of endocrinology at Adelaide's Queen Elizabeth Hospital and co-author of a book on the subject with Dr Lam.

"Flexibility can be a real challenge for people with Type 2 diabetes," Phillips says explaining that one common complication of diabetes is stiffness in joints and muscles that can result when the body's protein cells become bathed in glucose.

He's also a fan of the social benefits of tai chi for people with diabetes.

"We tend to underestimate the value of social interaction and the good feeling that you can get from exercising in a group."

Phillips adds that while medical management of diabetes often focuses on tablets, insulin treatments, blood tests and diet, there's increasing realisation that physical fitness and good mental health are important components in controlling the condition.

The joy of exercise

Joy Ford was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in her early thirties, over a decade ago, and also has sciatica.

She took up tai chi nearly two years ago and also walks for an hour or so five days a week.

"I can really feel the benefit from tai chi in my joints and I haven't had sciatica for more than twelve months now," she says.

"There's no way I would go to the gym with all those people in size ten leotards. The tai chi classes have a really big range of ages and sizes and people are very nice," she says, confessing that in the past, she's struggled to stay with any exercise programs for long.

Establishing an exercise routine that encourages long-term adherence is becoming more important for staying healthy as our sedentary Western lifestyle settles in for the long haul.