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ABSTRACT

Tai chi and qigong are tools in the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) toolkit. In recent decades, their use in the West has increased, often as an adjunct to traditional western medicine. The present paper summarizes some recent studies involving the use of tai chi and qigong as a means of treating a wide range of ailments, including musculoskeletal pain, Parkinson's disease, stress reduction, strengthening the immune system, cancer, quality of life, fatigue, metabolism, inflammation, improving sleep quality, cognition and mental health. Baduanjin, a set of qigong exercises, is a particularly popular treatment method for these and other ailments.

Keywords: Tai Chi; Qigong; Traditional Chinese Medicine; TCM; Baduanjin

Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has risen in popularity in the West in recent decades, although it has been practiced in many parts of Asia for several millennia. Some of the main branches of TCM include acupuncture, acupressure, herbs, tai chi and qigong. It is these last two branches that we shall discuss in the present paper.

Tai chi may be described as a form of moving meditation. It includes several sets of pre-arranged moves, much like karate katas or taekwondo poomsae. Practitioners often create their own sets of pre-arranged moves as well to suit their own taste. However, tai chi sets are slower than katas or poomsae, and they place more emphasis on breathing than do the karate and taekwondo forms. Tai chi forms resemble a choreographed dance in some ways. It originated as a martial art, but over the centuries the martial arts aspects were deemphasized, while the health benefits took on increasing importance. Qigong (pronounced chee gong or chee kung) is also a form of moving meditation, with more emphasis on breathing and spirituality. It focuses more on the movement of qi (energy) through the body than does tai chi. Its movements are also easier to perform, and do not necessarily involve a series of pre-arranged moves. Its movements have little or nothing in common with choreographed dancing. According to TCM, sickness is the result of blockages in the flow of qi. Both tai chi and qigong can break up or dissolve these blockages, thus preventing illness. Actually, a total explanation of how this process works is beyond the scope of the present article.

Suffice it to say that thousands of medical studies over the years have proven the benefits of both tai chi and qigong in the prevention and treatment of many different kinds of illnesses. If one were to discuss the main difference between TCM and mainstream Western medicine, it would be that TCM emphasizes prevention, whereas Western medicine focuses more on curing existing disease and ailments. Prior studies have reported on the application of tai chi and qigong to treat, and in some cases cure, a wide range of ailments [1-20]. In some cases, tai chi and qigong have been more effective in treating illness than conventional western medicine. In other cases they have been equally effective. When used in conjunction with western medicine, the result has sometimes been better than in cases where either Western medicine or TCM has been used exclusively. In recent years, several books have been written about the application of tai chi or qigong to prevent illness in general [21-37]. Various databases have been established to collect research on the health benefits of tai chi and qigong [38,39]. A series of DVDs and instructional booklets have been published that allow professionals and nonprofessionals alike to learn qigong techniques [40-48]. Online instructional programs are also available, for those who want a thorough and detailed structured approach to the study of qigong techniques [49].

Recent Studies

Several studies are published every month on the health benefits of either tai chi or qigong. Many of them are available for free download on the internet [50]. Entire hospitals in China are devoted to the treatment of illness using various tai chi and qigong techniques either exclusively, or in conjunction with other medical methods. Nineteen systematic reviews containing 74 trials and 80 meta analyses for individuals having Parkinson's disease or stroke found that tai chi, qigong and yoga appeared to be effective in improving balance. Tai chi practice enhanced motor function and independency in stroke patients [51]. There is growing evidence that mind-body therapies (MBTs), including tai chi and qigong, are effective in addressing a wide range of both physical and psychosocial symptoms and biomarkers of stress and immune function of individuals with cancer [52]. Tai chi and qigong therapy have been shown to improve the quality of life, fatigue and other symptoms in prostate cancer patients [53]. The findings in 17 randomized studies found that tai chi and qigong therapy had significant effects on both cognitive and physical functions in older adults [54]. Qigong exercises have been shown to mediate and focus on the local hypoxia environment of tissues and restore normal metabolism, which might normalize the circulation of metabolic and inflammation accumulation in tumor tissue and restore normal metabolism of tissues and cells through calm, relaxation and extreme Zen-style breathing [55].

A study of patients with chronic low back pain and leg pain found they had significant improvement after undertaking a regimen of Zhineng qigong [56]. Nineteen randomized-controlled studies and 8 systematic reviews of baduanjin (a set of qigong exercises) found that baduanjin exercises [42] were safe and had a beneficial effect on physical, cognitive and mental health. It was proven effective in improving sleep quality, reducing fatigue and improving the quality of life for patients having physical issues such as musculoskeletal pain, cancer and chronic illnesses. It was also effective in improving cognition, executive functions and slowing down age-related cognitive deterioration. It also alleviated various kinds of mental illness, increased patients' social competence and enhanced emotional regulation [57]. Several other studies have also found that the practice of qigong in general and baduanjin in particular have numerous positive health effects [58-100].

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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