

## Tai chi can boost immunity

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Since the earliest years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, many people have sworn by the beneficial effects of relaxation techniques including meditation, yoga and tai chi on the immune system. Now research in the United States has apparently confirmed what many positive people have claimed for years: tai chi really does enhance the immune system.

The small study, which was reported in the September edition of the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, found that older people who practiced the ancient Chinese combination of relaxation and movement increased the number of immune cells that protect against shingles.

The researchers, from the University of California, Los Angeles, [enrolled](#) [1]The act of signing up participants into a study. Generally this process involves evaluating a participant with respect to the eligibility criteria of the study and going through the informed consent process. 36 participants, all aged between 60 and 80, living in Southern California. All the participants either had chickenpox as children or were assumed to have been exposed to the chickenpox [virus](#) [2]A small infective organism which is incapable of reproducing outside a host cell., *Varicella zoster*, which also causes shingles in the elderly and people with damaged immune systems.

Half the participants underwent a 15-week course of tai chi chih, a westernised form of tai chi chuan, an exercise form that has existed as a martial art in Chinese culture for more than 2000 years and as an exercise for elderly people for around 300 years.

Tai chi chih involves a series of 20 slow and precise movements and poses, combined with coordinated breathing. It is a popular activity for elderly people in the US.

This group did three 45-minute Tai chi chih classes a week. The other 18 participants were placed on a waiting list for the course and served as a [control group](#) [3]A group of patients in a clinical trial who do not receive the drug or treatment being investigated, for the purpose of comparison with those who do. Participants in the control group of a clinical trial are either given standard treatment (excluding the drug being studied) or a placebo. for the study.

The researchers measured all the participants' specific immunity to the *Varicella zoster* virus at the start and end of the trial. In the group who did the tai chi classes, the average improvement in immunity to shingles increased by 50 percent, while in the control group there was no change.

While noting that the small sample size means that the results must be "cautiously interpreted and viewed as preliminary in nature," lead researcher Michael R. Irwin says that the study is the first to show that behavioural interventions such as tai chi can generate a specific immune response.

Further work will be needed to determine whether the short-term effects noted in this study can be replicated in longer and larger studies, and whether tai chi chih might be helpful in boosting immunity in people living with HIV/AIDS.

—*Psychosom Med.* 2003 Sep-Oct;65(5):824-30.

- [complementary and alternative therapies](#)

### Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/489>

[2] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/125>

[3] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/93>