



Qi Gong
and
Tai Chi:
promoting
practices
that
promote
healthy
aging

The National Expert Meeting on Qi Gong and Tai Chi Consensus Report outlines challenges and suggests strategies for developing and implementing effective, community-based programs for older adults

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In the final decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st, health promotion emerged as a complement to conventional medical interventions. Some examples of these innovations include disease risk management, self-care, reduction of negative drug interactions, falls and injury prevention, stress management, holistic healthcare, and mind-body medicine. An integral part of this healthcare evolution has been the growing importance of various forms of exercise modalities originating from Asia, such as Qi Gong and Tai Chi.

The movement and meditation practices known as Qi Gong and Tai Chi are based on ancient Chinese philosophies purported to promote mental and physical health, vitality and functional well-being. Additionally, these philosophies are said to cultivate social and spiritual values.¹ In the West, increasing interest has focused on the benefits of Qi Gong and Tai Chi as gentle physical activity for promoting health and as moving meditation for stress management and disease risk reduction. Growing evidence suggests that these practices may be among the best modes of physical activity for diverse populations, since they are low impact, low cost and easy to learn.

Tai Chi and Qi Gong may sometimes be associated with complex choreographed

sets of movements or *forms*. However, the essential components of Qi Gong are simple to learn and practice, and many modified forms of Tai Chi are more accessible and less complicated than the original forms imported from China.

Traditionally, Qi Gong and Tai Chi practice includes 4 major components:

- body posture adjustment and gentle movement
- meditation and purposeful relaxation
- breath regulation practice
- self-administered massage (Qi Gong)

It is possible to integrate these essential components into various combinations, resulting in activity options ranging from very mild and slow to dynamic and vigorous. Qi Gong and Tai Chi can be practiced walking, standing, sitting or lying down.

The broad consensus is that Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs provide numerous physical and psychological health benefits and contribute to the well-being of those who participate regularly. Research indicates that practicing Qi Gong and Tai Chi reduces blood pressure, increases maximum oxygen consumption, increases immune function, and improves flexibility.² In addition, there is abundant empirical evidence that Tai Chi participants lower their fear and risk of falling.^{3,4} These individuals also experience an increase in lower extremity strength,⁵ as well as movement confidence related to posture and balance.⁶ Furthermore, the meditative and breathing practice aspects of Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression, thereby improving overall quality of life.⁷

Background to the expert meeting

Although Qi Gong and Tai Chi were introduced in the United States decades

ago, few efforts have examined how best to deliver evidence-based programs to the public. To date, much of the evidence about the effectiveness of these practices in the West has emerged from short-term intervention programs designed for research purposes. Many issues must be addressed to translate findings from research studies into community programs for senior centers, hospitals, faith-based institutions, retirement homes, and other community settings.

Part of the challenge is to design programs that can be taught by appropriately trained instructors and disseminated widely in communities throughout the US. For large numbers of people to benefit from the Qi Gong and Tai Chi experience, it will no longer be feasible to depend exclusively on experts (often called *masters*) to deliver programs. Instead, lay leaders must be trained in the fundamental principles of these practices.

To foster greater access to the benefits of Qi Gong and Tai Chi, the Archstone Foundation provided funding to the National Blueprint Office at the University of Illinois, the National Council on the Aging, and the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi to convene a national expert meeting. This meeting's purpose was twofold:

- to address the challenges of integrating Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs into the aging network; and
- to identify the necessary components of an effective program to meet the needs of diverse populations with varying functional abilities.

In November 2005, more than 30 nationally and internationally recognized experts in Qi Gong and Tai Chi, physical activity and aging, and biomedical research gathered at the University of

Continued on page 52

Qi Gong and Tai Chi: promoting practices that promote healthy aging

Continued from page 51

Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. These individuals explored and recommended key strategies on issues related to providing accessible and widespread programs.

This article provides an overview of the expert recommendations and outcomes of the National Expert Meeting on Qi Gong and Tai Chi. Organizations may use these recommendations in developing and implementing effective and cost-efficient community-based programs.

Program content and structure

Although some variation across programs will inevitably exist, the expert participants identified the essential components of most well-organized and effective Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs as follows:

Course content

- dynamic body movements that promote balance, flexibility, strength and range of motion while sitting, standing or walking
- static standing postures that promote balance and concentration
- static sitting postures that are the foundation to meditation
- breathing practices that promote oxygenation, relaxation, and concentration and foster self-awareness
- meditation practices for concentration and focus
- self-administered massage, which accelerates natural healing mechanisms
- information about complementary and holistic healthcare (e.g., natural healing, diet, longevity or vitality enhancement and philosophies that foster inner peace)

Class characteristics

- group activities that provide ample opportunities for social interaction

- interesting practices that are stimulating and provide fun and enjoyment
- quiet environment for optimal meditation and movement practice
- safe and supportive facilities to accommodate participants of differing physical activity levels

Ideally, group programs should be offered 3 or more times per week for about one hour each session. However, the expert panel recognized that many facilities schedule programs once or twice per week. Certain populations will need briefer interventions or carefully modified practice settings to accommodate a wide variety of disabilities and limitations. Individual daily practice is also strongly encouraged for at least 15–30 minutes on those days when group programs do not meet. Audio, video and DVD programs for home practice may prove helpful.

The expert-meeting participants recognized that additional research studies are required to provide more definitive recommendations about the frequency, duration and intensity of Qi Gong and Tai Chi needed for specific health improvement outcomes. Such studies will also provide information on which methods support widespread diffusion of these practices.

Program instructors

The experts concurred that there is a need to train basic-level lay leaders who could introduce older adults to Qi Gong and Tai Chi concepts and programs. Lay leaders should demonstrate the following minimum requirements and competences to teach these practices safely and effectively:

- awareness and understanding of the connection between Qi Gong and Tai Chi philosophy and practices
- basic knowledge of Qi Gong or Tai Chi movements and principles

- ability to tailor programs for specific populations and limitations
- enthusiasm for learning about and teaching Qi Gong and Tai Chi
- leadership qualities
- teaching and problem-solving skills
- ability to empathize and connect with participants
- creativity
- safety knowledge (CPR and First Aid)

Additionally, lay leaders should have graduated from a formal Qi Gong or Tai Chi class taught by a qualified trainer.

Ideally, prior to leading classes or practice sessions, lay leaders should have practiced Tai Chi or Qi Gong for about 6 months in an institutional setting with a qualified Tai Chi instructor. Alternatively, they should have received 20–50 hours of initial formal training from a recognized Tai Chi or Qi Gong organization. The experts conceded that a high-intensity weekend course (14–16 hours), with a clearly defined internship or practicum, may substitute for longer formal training activities for those with prior knowledge in exercise/health and well-developed teaching skills.

Continuing education is particularly important for lay leaders to improve their skills and knowledge of Qi Gong or Tai Chi practice. Having an expert instructor who can serve as an ongoing advisor is ideal for lay leaders; however, materials such as toolkits, manuals, websites and video courses are useful for advancing their practice, teaching and leadership skills. The expert-meeting participants also recommended that lay leaders take additional short courses periodically to further develop their skills and understanding of Qi Gong or Tai Chi teaching and practice.

Programs for participants with special needs

Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs can benefit everyone, including people who



A group practices Qi Gong at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Photo: Tom Rogers. Image courtesy of the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi

are chronically ill, frail older adults, and those with disabilities. When developing and initiating new programs, leaders should consider each participant's functional status, medical history and fitness level. Self-evaluation forms can help in determining special needs. In addition, the class environment should be safe and supportive to accommodate all functional levels.

Creative leaders can find ways to involve adults with disabilities. The standing and walking Qi Gong and Tai Chi

movements, breathing exercises, and meditation techniques can be easily adapted for participants in wheelchairs. These mind-body methods can also serve as complementary therapy for people with chronic or acute illnesses and those experiencing pain, along with pre- and post-surgical programs and rehabilitation. Lay leaders could benefit from working with or seeking the guidance of more experienced instructors in designing programs for people with special needs.

Diffusion of Qi Gong and Tai Chi in communities

Many barriers could potentially impede reaching a large number of older adults through community programs. Some barriers include misinformation about the inherent complexity of Qi Gong and Tai Chi, and the perceptions that these practices are too unusual or esoteric, or that they are martial arts programs. Another barrier is a lack of public knowledge about the health benefits they might receive from these practices.

In the minds of many older Americans, Qi Gong and Tai Chi are often perceived as foreign and inextricably linked with Chinese culture. Accordingly, it may be worthwhile to present Tai Chi and Qi Gong programs translated in Western language, focusing on the 4 essential health practices described previously. Organizations could advertise these programs as *gentle movement and meditation*, as opposed to Tai Chi or Qi Gong.

Since older adults often perceive the practices as complex, difficult to understand, and difficult to perform, it is important to emphasize the simplicity and ease of both Qi Gong and Tai Chi, as well as the 4 essential health practices. It is also key to stress that everyone can derive benefits from Qi Gong and Tai Chi, regardless of age or physical status. Finding ways for people to try a class—perhaps as a part of other physical activity programs—prior to committing to a full program will help spur adoption. The program adoption rate will accelerate if potential program users and organizations learn about others who participate in Qi Gong and Tai Chi and who derive significant benefits from these practices.

The expert panel offered these additional marketing and communication strategies for promoting programs:

Continued on page 54

Qi Gong and Tai Chi: promoting practices that promote healthy aging

Continued from page 53

Tai Chi info for active aging practitioners

Looking for articles that describe Tai Chi practice? Check out the following articles in ICAA publications:

- “Wu style Tai Chi for older adults,” by Master Henry Cheng. Available in *Functional U*[®], the ICAA’s electronic publication, September/October 2006.
- “Ezy Tai Chi: a simpler practice for seniors,” by K. John Fisher, PhD, Fuzhong Li, PhD, and Machiko Shirai, MS, of Oregon Research Institute. Published in the *Journal on Active Aging*[®], May/June 2004.

Illustrated with numerous photographs of movements, these articles are available free online to ICAA members by logging into the members only section of the ICAA website, www.icaa.cc. For information about becoming a member or subscribing to these publications, please call the ICAA toll-free at 866-335-9777.

- Publish articles about Qi Gong and Tai Chi in trade journals and magazines written for specific populations. Emphasize the remarkable history of Qi Gong and Tai Chi in China for thousands of years.
- Present information about Qi Gong and Tai Chi at professional conferences related to physical activity, fitness and wellness, medicine, and aging.
- Provide television and radio programming about Qi Gong and Tai Chi for widespread distribution.
- Develop press releases and other materials for the news media with information on Qi Gong and Tai Chi.

- Create a strategy to involve high-profile citizens (entertainers, sports stars) and communicate their involvement to the media.
- Develop a clear and concise marketing message about the benefits of Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs for target populations, including older adults. In addition, market the value of adopting these programs to community-based organizations.
- Highlight successful community Qi Gong or Tai Chi programs and provide participant testimonials for media use.
- Develop information about Qi Gong and Tai Chi for distribution at community health fairs and other local venues.
- Target and implement additional research and communicate the findings to the media and to healthcare professionals. Explain the benefits of Qi Gong and Tai Chi in Western terms.

Program evaluation

As organizations and facilities begin to adopt Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs, they will need to assess the effectiveness of new programs and their impact on participants’ health and well-being. Evaluations can include measures of health, social factors, biomarkers, quality of life, and satisfaction ratings.

Since the range of purported benefits vary so widely, it can be challenging to select the outcomes for measuring program effectiveness. Focusing program evaluation on traditional exercise adherence and fitness outcomes is a sensible first step, since strong support already exists for the needs of older adults to increase physical activity levels. Later, program evaluation may examine markers of progress specifically tied to the physiological changes found in research.

Questions for future research

Although many research studies have documented the various health benefits of Qi Gong and Tai Chi practice, many questions still remain. Disseminating this intervention throughout the aging network is a process that will likely span several years or even decades, as more organizations realize the value of Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs and these practices become increasingly popular among those who derive their benefits. Future research should explore the following questions:

- What are the optimal frequency, duration and intensity for effective, evidence-based interventions?
- What are the long-term health effects of participation in Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs?
- How does participation in Qi Gong and Tai Chi affect chronic physical and mental disease conditions?
- What are the measurable biological mechanisms by which Qi Gong and Tai Chi deliver mental and physical health benefits?
- How do instructor training and qualifications affect program outcomes?
- What factors influence organization/agency adoptability?
- What are the health and social-care cost savings associated with these programs?

Conclusion

The panel of the National Expert Meeting on Qi Gong and Tai Chi came together to explore and recommend key strategies on issues related to providing accessible and widespread programs for older adults. These experts have addressed the challenges of developing effective, evidence-based Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs that can be disseminated widely throughout the

Continued on page 56

Qi Gong and Tai Chi: promoting practices that promote healthy aging

Continued from page 54

Resources

Active for Life

www.activeforlife.info

Center for Taiji Studies

www.chentaiji.com

Health World Online

Qigong and Tai Chi Alternative
Therapy Center

[www.healthy.net/scr/therapy.asp?
Thid=22](http://www.healthy.net/scr/therapy.asp?Thid=22)

Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi

[www.instituteofintegralqigongand
taichi.org](http://www.instituteofintegralqigongand
taichi.org)

National Blueprint Initiative

www.agingblueprint.org

National Council on the Aging Center for Healthy Aging

www.healthyagingprograms.org

National Qigong Association

www.nqa.org

Qigong Association of America

www.qi.org

Qigong Institute

[www.qigonginstitute.org/main_
page/main_page.php](http://www.qigonginstitute.org/main_
page/main_page.php)

Tai Chi Network

www.taichinetwork.org/index.html

World T'ai Chi and Qigong Day

www.worldtaichiday.org

Western world. Their consensus recommendations will assist organizations, agencies and facilities that seek to develop and implement successful mind-body practice programs for their constituents.☺

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