

Health Insights Today

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CAM in Review

When reading reports on new research, it is important to remember that no single study should be seen as providing the whole truth. The following reports offer helpful clues but in most cases further research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

Yoga and Mind-Body Therapies May Help Alleviate Menopause Symptoms

Researchers in Virginia and West Virginia performed a systematic review of the peer-reviewed literature on the effects of self-administered mind-body therapies on menopausal symptoms. They found 21 papers representing 18 clinical trials from 6 countries, including 12 randomized controlled trials, 1 non-randomized controlled trial, and 5 uncontrolled trials. Interventions included yoga and/or meditation-based programs, tai chi, and other relaxation practices, including muscle relaxation and breath-based techniques, relaxation response training, and low-frequency sound-wave therapy.

Eight of the nine studies of yoga, tai chi, and meditation-based programs reported improvement in overall menopausal and vasomotor symptoms; six of seven trials indicated improvement in mood and sleep with yoga-based programs, and four studies reported reduced musculoskeletal pain. Results from the remaining nine trials suggest that breath-based and other relaxation therapies also show promise for alleviating vasomotor and other menopausal symptoms, although intergroup findings were mixed. The authors noted that the studies reviewed suffered methodological or other limitations, which complicated interpretation of findings. They concluded that yoga-based and certain other mind-body therapies may be beneficial for alleviating specific menopausal symptoms but that firm conclusions regarding efficacy are not yet possible.

Innes KE, Selfe TK, Vishnu A. Mind-body therapies for menopausal symptoms: A systematic review. *Maturitas*. Feb 16, 2010 [epub ahead of print]

Two Studies Show Tai Chi Benefits

I. Increased Knee Muscle Strength and Decreased Fear of Falling from Tai Chi

People with osteoarthritis can experience difficulty walking and poor strength, in some cases leading to falls and fractures. Exercise has been found to increase strength and bone mineral density. Researchers in South Korea studying the potential benefits of tai chi for older people with osteoarthritis found increased knee extensor muscle endurance along with decreased fear of falling during daily activities.

Eighty-two (82) women with osteoarthritis, recruited from outpatient clinics and community health centers, were randomly assigned to a tai chi program or a control group. Of these, 30 subjects (mean age=63 years) in the tai chi group and 35 (mean age=61 years) in the control group completed post-test measures at 6 months. After the 6-month study period, subjects in the tai chi program had significantly greater knee extensor endurance and significantly greater bone mineral density in the neck of the proximal femur, Ward's triangle and trochanter than the controls. However, knee extensor and flexor strength did not differ significantly between the groups. The fear of falling during daily activities reduced significantly more in the tai chi group.

Song R, Roberts BL, Lee EO, Lam P, Bae SC. A randomized study of the effects of tai chi on muscle strength, bone mineral density, and fear of falling in women with osteoarthritis. *J Altern Complement Med*. Mar 2010;16(3):227-233.

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II. Tai Chi Improves Physical Function in Knee Arthritis Patients

Researchers in Guangzhou, China, evaluated the effect of a 24-week tai chi program on physical functions in older Chinese women with knee osteoarthritis. Thirty-five older Chinese women with knee OA were randomized into tai chi (n = 18) and attention control (wellness education and stretching) groups (n = 17). Subjects in the tai chi group practiced the 24-form simplified Yang-style tai chi 2 to 4 times a week for 24 weeks with frequency gradually increased. Physical function was assessed using the Western Ontario and McMaster University Osteoarthritis Index (WOMAC), 6-minute walk distance and stair climb time.

Compared with the control group, the participants in the tai chi group had statistically significant improvements in changes of the WOMAC total score, WOMAC pain subscale, WOMAC stiffness subscale, WOMAC function subscale, the 6-minute walk distance, and the stair climb time. Researchers concluded that their study suggests that tai chi provides a safe, feasible and useful exercise option for older female patients with knee osteoarthritis.

Ni GX, Song L, Yu B, Huang CH, Lin JH. Tai chi improves physical function in older Chinese women with knee osteoarthritis. *J Clin Rheumatol*. Mar 2010;16(2):64-67.