

Qigong for Health: a Research Update

Studies confirm that the ancient art of qigong has lots of relevance in today's high-tech world.

Mind-body fitness is rapidly becoming a valuable and profitable service for fitness professionals to offer clients in clubs, gyms and private settings. While yoga and Pilates are hot favorites, the gentle art of qigong (pronounced *chee kung*)—a Chinese practice dating back several thousand years—is also finding its way into mainstream American culture. As consumers discover the benefits of qigong experientially, the research community is working hard to provide scientific data to verify and explain the method's healing effects. From 1992 to 2006, the budget of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM, formerly the Office of Alternative Medicine) increased from \$2 million to \$122.7 million (NCCAM 2006). This financial investment indicates clear interest in healing techniques that are cost-effective and free of side effects, and in this regard qigong has much to offer.

How Qigong Heals

According to the ancient qi masters, qi is the fundamental energy of the universe, and qigong practice cultivates this energy, thereby awakening natural self-healing properties within the body, mind and spirit. In the Chinese tradition, there are three branches of qigong—medical, martial and spiritual—and all three can be either dynamic (moving) or quiescent (still). (The links between the branches are very close: See “The Healer, the Warrior and the Priest,” right.)

Qigong's healing effect is based on the same principles as acupuncture. Each ex-

ercise works on a particular “meridian” or “collateral” in the body. In Chinese medicine, meridians and collaterals are “energy pathways.” Meridians are the major channels, and collaterals are smaller pathways branching off the meridians. For stress reduction, health maintenance and sports conditioning, qigong movements are used to stimulate and increase the flow of blood and qi to the various meridians and collaterals.

Dynamic qigong for health consists of exercises that, in Western terms, combine continuous static stretching, breath work and visualization with multiplanar movements designed to stabilize the core. Mastering the subtleties of this practice takes time and patience, but the basic exercises can be learned and performed easily—even by deconditioned and elderly clients.

Qigong is perfect for today's busy population, since it requires no apparatus, props or special clothing and can be performed within the space of an office cubicle. What's more, the exercises can be done sitting, standing or even lying down. And once learned, they can be practiced inside or outside, on any type of surface.

(For more on how to teach a simple qigong routine, see “An Introduction to Qigong” by Ted J. Cibik in February 2001 *IDEA Health & Fitness Source*, available to IDEA members through the Article Archive at www.idealife.com.)

What the Research Says

Recent studies have shown that qigong practice can favorably affect various health conditions:

High Blood Pressure

There is evidence that qigong can lower high blood pressure.

Researchers recruited 36 hypertensive men and women and divided them into two groups: a qigong group and a control group. The first group practiced qigong for 8 weeks. The investigators recorded levels of blood pressure as well as total cholesterol and other lipids among all study subjects. Patients in the qigong group significantly reduced both their blood pressure and their total-cholesterol levels. The research was published in the *International Journal of Neuroscience* (2004; 114 [7], 777–86).

In another study, published in the advance online edition of *Journal of Human Hypertension* (2005; [May 19], 1–8),

the healer, the warrior and the priest

The healer, the warrior and the priest share the same goal—clarity, which is possible only when harmony and balance are present. The difference lies in the use to which these various experts put their skills. Whereas medical and spiritual qigong practices are used to heal, qigong as a martial art—if practiced by a true master—can injure or even kill. Commonly, in ancient China, a community's martial arts master was also the healer-priest.

University of Hong Kong researchers observed 88 patients with mild hypertension over a 16-week period as they participated in either Goulin qigong or conventional exercise. The goal was to determine whether qigong would provide the same blood pressure-lowering benefits as conventional exercise.

One group took part in two 2-hour qigong classes per week for 4 weeks. After that, classes were held monthly. During the last 12-week period, subjects were instructed to practice qigong daily on their own for 60 minutes each morning and 15 minutes each evening. The conventional-exercise group participated in relaxation, stretching, walking and step classes, receiving the same amount of instruction as the other group. Like the qigong participants, they were then asked to perform 60 minutes of exercise each morning and 15 minutes each evening on their own.

After 16 weeks, the researchers compared heart rate, weight, body mass index, waist circumference and total-cholesterol levels in both groups. All subjects experienced approximately equivalent improvements in health measures. The findings supported the practice of qigong as a reasonable alternative to conventional exercise, with equivalent benefits.

Diabetes

At the University of Queensland in Australia, a pilot 3-month study on the effects of qigong and tai chi practice on diabetes achieved very successful results. For the study, Liu Xin, a qigong and tai chi master, developed a series of exercises especially designed to target the risk factors for diabetes.

The 11 participants gained numerous health benefits from the regular practice of tai chi and qigong. Their flexibility improved, they had more energy, and they found they were sleeping better. "One of the most important results that came from the study was the significant reduction in waist circumference measurement," said Liu. "Waist circumference is an indicator of central obesity, and central obesity is recognized as an important risk factor for developing many health problems, including diabetes and cardiovascular diseases." Waist circumference is also one indicator of metabolic syndrome; other indi-

cators include blood glucose levels, insulin resistance, blood pressure and body weight—all of which improved significantly in these subjects.

The results were released on UQ News Online, a university of Queensland website, in December 2005. Following this pilot study, the researchers began recruiting volunteers for a larger trial.

Longevity

In another pilot study, researchers in Texas studied the genomic profile and function of neutrophils (a type of white blood cells) in experienced qigong practitioners versus a group of healthy controls. The controls had not performed any mind-body practice for at least a year. The study found that the changes in gene expression in qigong practitioners were characterized by enhanced immunity and rapid resolution of inflammation. Some cells in the bodies of the qigong subjects lived five times longer than the same cells in the controls.

The authors concluded that "qigong practice may regulate immunity, metabolic rate and cell death, possibly at the transcriptional level slowing the aging process." The study appeared in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* (2005; 11 [1], 29–39).

Seniors' Physical Performance and Quality of Life

In a randomized, controlled trial conducted last summer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, researchers found that healthy seniors who practiced a combination of qigong and tai chi three times a week for 6 months experienced significant physical benefits after only 2 months.

Thirty-nine subjects participated in the mind-body exercise program, and there were 29 controls. The average age was 80. Subjects were given a battery of laboratory-controlled physical-performance tests in the beginning as a baseline, then again after 2- and 4-month intervals. Qigong and tai chi participants demonstrated noticeable improvements in balance, lower-body strength and stance width.

In a smaller, related study, a small subset of the exercise subjects—described as "very enthusiastic about their qigong and tai chi practice"—were interviewed about their experience. One said she was more confident of her ability to climb stairs.

Another said, "I have the sense that I'm not going to go downhill nearly as quickly as I might have." A third remarked, "This has made me feel much younger . . . much younger, let's say, 10 years. Someone who hasn't done this has no comprehension about how much better it has made me feel." Other comments pointed to improvements in sleep quality, concentration, memory and self-esteem.

The results of the two studies, which were unusual in providing both quantitative and qualitative feedback, were released online by the university's news bureau on June 28, 2006.

A Modern-Day Practice

A number of these studies are very small, and larger, randomized trials are needed to confirm the results. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that qigong offers multiple physical and emotional benefits. With its slow, gentle movements, it holds particular usefulness for clients who are elderly, obese, sickly or frail. However, it is relevant for people of all ages and abilities. Its portability, simplicity and effectiveness make it an ideal stress management and health maintenance tool to counterbalance the pace of today's hectic lifestyles.

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Reference

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). 2006. NCCAM funding: Appropriations history. <http://nccam.nih.gov/about/appropriations/index.htm>; retrieved October 2006.