



I Want To Be Able to Pick Up My Grand Kids

You may be seeing some unfamiliar words among your listings of senior exercise classes lately. These oddities may include Tai Chi (pronounced Tie Chee), Qi Gong (also spelled Chi Kung, pronounced Chee Gong) or, the easier to pronounce but still daunting, Yoga. Seniors all over the country are discovering the many benefits of these “alternative” or “integrative” exercises and the overwhelming response seems to be, “Try it, even if you can’t pronounce it!”

Today, progressive seniors are demanding a wider variety of treatment options from their physicians. This is one reason integrative exercises that used to be on the fringes were welcomed into the traditional fold of the medical community. Yoga, tai chi and qi gong are now more accepted as means of dealing with chronic conditions or to recover from intense treatments such as radiation or chemotherapy. Seniors are beginning to realize it will take a constellation of traditional and non-traditional approaches to lead independent and healthy lives.

General benefits that run as a common thread through the fabric of integrative exercise include increased strength and flexibility, improved joint mobility, and better balance while engaging the mind through attention to the movement and breathing. While all of these benefits are significant, when it comes to seniors and exercise, all roads lead to the goal of “functional health” or the ability to perform common activities of daily living independently and with greater ease. In short, seniors want to be able to pick up their grand kids.

The benefits of integrative exercises are closely linked to improved functional health. While physical exercise has many benefits, such as increased strength and bone mass from lifting weights, integrative exercises provide benefits on several levels. For example, attention to your breath and different parts of your body while practicing yoga postures sharpens the mind. Tai Chi emphasizes a connection to the environment as a whole and connection to a power greater than ourselves. As a result, many participants report improved emotional balance. Increased flexibility and improved balance help seniors to continue to dress and bathe independently or perhaps even move without a walker.

Unfortunately, integrative exercise programs continue to be self pay but many senior centers provide classes at reduced rates. If you are uncertain if this type of exercise will be right for you, ask if the program in your area offers free trial classes or an introductory presentation to help you understand the possible benefits and guide you through a few of the movements.

If you are concerned about a heavy emphasis on meditation, starting with a class at your local YMCA or hospital-based wellness center will ensure that the first priority will be on the physical aspects of the exercise. Finally, you may be fearful that these exercises will be too strenuous. Most classes are grouped according to ability rather than ailment or medical condition. For example, a yoga or tai chi class may be modified for all persons in a wheelchair rather than having one class for those with arthritis which could result in a wide range of ability. Again, if you locate a class through a senior center, or hospital-based wellness program you can make certain that the class will be adapted to fit your capabilities.

The benefit may be as small as being able to put on your shoes easier or as significant as walking away from a wheelchair. In any case, the benefits are so extensive why not try it. You can learn to pronounce it later.

For more information on integrative exercise you can contact you local recreation center or hospital-based wellness program. In addition, the American Yoga Association can provide information on their “Easy Does It Fitness” program targeted for seniors. The American Yoga Association can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 19986, Sarasota, Florida 34276, phone at 941-927-4977 or email at yogamerica@aol.com.

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