

The Very Real Benefits of Tai Chi Walking

The mindful movement has become popular online. You won't bulk up if you practice it, but it can improve balance and reduce stress.



Li Li, a kinesiologist at Georgia Southern University, demonstrates Tai Chi walking.

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Most people who take Tai Chi from Leda Elliott are looking to improve their balance or relieve stress. A few weeks ago, a man walked into her class at an assisted living facility with a different goal.

“I saw on YouTube that I could gain some muscles,” she recalled him saying. “Is this the right place?”

Ms. Elliott — who owns a studio called A Thousand Cranes in Lynn, Mass. — immediately knew what had brought him in. In recent months, interest in a practice some have called Tai Chi walking has swelled, largely driven by social media and videos of A.I.-generated musclebound, gray-haired characters. Many of the claims are outlandish, for example that older adults can bulk up or slim down with just, say, seven minutes a day of gentle exercise.

Tai Chi can deliver real health benefits, said Li Li, a kinesiology professor at Georgia Southern University, and one of its foundational moves is a slow, controlled walk. But anyone taking up the practice should start with realistic expectations, he said.

The actual rewards include better balance and a reduced risk of falls, added Dr. Li, who also teaches Tai Chi — but not bulging muscles.

Here’s what to know about the practice and whether it’s worth adding into your routine.

What is Tai Chi walking?

Tai Chi is a traditional Chinese martial art with complex, flowing poses — known as forms — that integrate movement, breath and mindfulness. Typically, Tai Chi walking (or Tai Chi gait) is the first thing that new students learn.

“It’s the most fundamental movement for Tai Chi practice,” said Feng Yang, an associate professor of biomechanics, kinesiology and health at Georgia State University, who practices and studies Tai Chi.





When you walk normally, you push off from one step to the next, using momentum to propel you forward. Tai Chi walking takes away the pushing, slowing everything down until you have total control of each movement.

“Some people call Tai Chi gait a catlike walk,” Dr. Yang said. “You need to walk very slowly and silently.”

How does Tai Chi help balance?

Preventing falls at any age requires two basic capacities, Dr. Yang said: recognizing when you’re off balance and having the strength to correct course. Tai Chi can help address both, by improving your body’s proprioception — the sense of where you are in space — and strengthening your leg and core muscles.

Research also suggests Tai Chi can reduce the actual fear of falling in older adults, an anxiety that can become self-fulfilling by causing people to limit their movements and become weaker.

While most studies have analyzed the full Tai Chi practice, there’s reason to believe some benefits can be achieved through Tai Chi walking alone, Dr. Yang said. In one very small study, he and another researcher found that a Tai Chi gait challenged participants’ balance more than a typical walking gait, forcing the body to stabilize itself.

Mastering the basics of the movement can also prepare you to learn more advanced forms of Tai Chi, Dr. Li said. He also said it was far easier to learn than the complete practice, including for older adults with dementia or other types of cognitive impairment.

How can you add Tai Chi walking to your routine?

The basic Tai Chi gait is simple enough to learn from online videos, Dr. Yang said. And it’s safe for nearly everyone; while some Tai Chi poses can aggravate knee pain, Tai Chi walking generally doesn’t require much bending of the joint.





To take a basic Tai Chi walking step, first soften your knees and shift all your weight onto your right leg. Then, pick up your left leg and place it gently in front of you, heel first. Slowly pour all your weight into the left leg before lifting the right heel, then the entire leg, and step forward without relying on any momentum. As you move, aim to keep your body upright and steady; Ms. Elliott recommends her students imagine balancing a teacup on top of their head.

Try two to four steps to familiarize yourself with the movement, keeping your attention focused on every part and breathing naturally. From there, you can try taking steps backward or forward, eventually adding weight shifts, turns and arm motions, Dr. Li said.

While Dr. Yang recommended taking classes to learn full Tai Chi forms, Tai Chi walking can easily be added to your usual fitness routine; Ms. Elliott said she often has her students start with just two to three minutes of the movements. You can do it anywhere — outside, down a hallway or around your living room. Going barefoot or wearing soft-soled shoes can help you connect to the ground and the feeling of shifting your weight.

Beyond its potential to improve stability, you can also think of Tai Chi walking as meditation, a dose of mindfulness to help reduce anxiety and instill a sense of calm, Ms. Elliott said. Just stay focused as you stride.

“The practice is only as good as the attention you bring to it,” Ms. Elliott said.