

National Expert Meeting on Qi Gong and Tai Chi Consensus Report

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Introduction

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. Disease risk management, self-care, reduction of negative drug interactions, falls and injury prevention, stress management, holistic health care, and mind/body medicine are a few examples of these innovations. An integral part of this evolution of health care has been the growing importance of various forms of exercise modalities originating from Asia, including Qi Gong and Tai Chi.

Qi Gong and Tai Chi are movement and meditation practices based on ancient Chinese philosophies that are purported to promote mental and physical health, vitality, and functional well-being and to cultivate social and spiritual values.¹ In the West, increasing interest has focused on the benefits of Qi Gong and Tai Chi as forms of gentle physical activity for promoting health and as a moving meditation for stress management and disease risk reduction. There is growing evidence that Qi Gong and Tai Chi practices may be among the best forms of physical activity for diverse populations since these activities 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 easy to learn and practice, and many modified forms of Tai Chi are more accessible and less complicated than the original complex movement forms imported from China.

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

- Body posture adjustment and gentle movement
- Meditation and purposeful relaxation
- Breath regulation practice
- Self-administered massage (Qi Gong)

These four essential components can be integrated into various combinations, resulting in options ranging from very mild and slow to dynamic and vigorous. Qi Gong and Tai Chi can be practiced either walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.

There was a broad consensus 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 has shown that Qi Gong and Tai Chi participation reduces blood pressure, increases maximum oxygen consumption, increases immune function, and improves flexibility.² There is abundant empirical evidence that Tai Chi participants

lower their fear and risk of falling^{3,4} and experience an increase in lower extremity strength,⁵ as well as movement confidence related to posture and balance.⁶ 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 practices were introduced in the United States decades ago, there have been few efforts to examine how best to deliver evidence-based programs to the public. To date, much of the evidence about the effectiveness of Qi Gong and Tai Chi 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 that can be delivered in 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 U.S. In order 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 Qi Gong and Tai Chi.

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. The purpose of the meeting was 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, a panel of 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 Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to explore and recommend 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. These recommendations may be used in developing and implementing effective and cost-efficient community-based programs.

Program Content and Structure

Although there will inevitably be some variation across programs, the expert participants identified the essential components of most well organized and effective Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs.

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 quiescent 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 health care (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 three 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 to 30 minutes on those days when group programs do not meet. Audio, video, and DVD programs for home practice may be helpful.

The expert meeting participants recognized that additional research studies are needed in order to provide more definitive recommendations regarding the frequency, duration, and intensity needed to attain specific health improvement outcomes, as well as to provide information on which methods support the goal of widespread diffusion.

Program Instructors

The experts concurred that there is a need to train basic-level lay leaders who could provide older adults with access to introductory Qi Gong and Tai Chi concepts and programs. Lay leaders should demonstrate these minimum requirements and competences to teach Qi Gong or Tai Chi 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 six months in an institutional setting with a qualified Tai Chi instructor, or have received 20 to 50 hours of initial formal training from a recognized Tai Chi or Qi Gong organization. The experts were willing to concede that a short, high intensity weekend course (14 to 16 hours) with a clearly defined internship or practicum may substitute for longer formal training activities for individuals 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; however, materials such as toolkits, manuals, websites, and video courses are useful ways to help leaders advance their practice, teaching, and leadership skills. It was 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 be beneficial for everyone including people who 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. A self-evaluation form can be used to determine special needs. 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. In addition, these mind/body methods can serve as complementary therapy for people with chronic or acute illnesses and those experiencing pain along with pre- and post-surgical programs and rehabilitation from diverse injuries, disabilities, or infirmities. 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 the effectiveness of 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 four essential health practices. As mentioned previously, these practices include body posture adjustment and gentle movement; mediation and purposeful relaxation; breath regulation practice; and self-administered massage. Programs could be advertised as “gentle movement and meditation” as opposed to Tai Chi or Qi Gong.

Since older adults often perceive Qi Gong and Tai Chi as complex, difficult to understand, and difficult to perform, it is important to emphasize the simplicity and ease of both Tai Chi/Qi Gong and the four essential health practices as well as the fact that everyone can derive benefits from these practices, 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 practice 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:

- 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 TV and radio programming about Qi Gong and Tai Chi for widespread distribution.
- Develop press releases and other materials for 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 health care 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, evaluation will be necessary 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 on which to focus to measure program effectiveness. Focusing program evaluation on traditional exercise adherence and fitness outcomes is a sensible first step since there is already strong support 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 a new and innovative intervention such as Tai Chi and Qi Gong throughout the aging network is an ongoing process that will likely span several years or even decades as a growing number of organizations realize the value of such programs and Qi Gong and Tai Chi practices become more popular among people who derive their benefits.

- 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 has addressed the challenges of developing effective, evidence-based Qi Gong and Tai Chi programs that can be disseminated widely throughout the Western world. Their consensus recommendations are useful to assist organizations, agencies, and facilities in developing and implementing mind/body practice programs for their customers, constituencies, members, and residents.

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