



Mindful Movement Part 1: Tai Chi

Hosts: Rebecca Gillett, MS OTR/L and Julie Eller
Guest Speaker: Dr. Paul Lam, Creator of Tai Chi for Arthritis

Physical activity is essential for maintaining physical and mental health, and it's one of the best treatments for arthritis pain and stiffness. But many people with arthritis struggle to find an activity that's gentle on their joints and that they enjoy and will stick with.

Dr. Paul Lam, a family physician, global leader in tai chi and founder of the Tai Chi for Health Institute, created the Tai Chi for Arthritis program because he understands how beneficial it is for people with arthritis. Its slow, controlled, thoughtful movements help improve flexibility, strength and balance as well as mental health, and research has shown it can help ease arthritis pain.

In this Live Yes! With Arthritis podcast, Dr. Lam describes what tai chi is, explains its physical, mental and emotional benefits and offers some ways to get started.

Additional Resources

[Tai Chi for Arthritis article](#)

[Tai Chi for Arthritis DVD](#)

[How to Learn Tai Chi video](#)



Episode 42 Mindful Movement Part 1 | Tai Chi
Full Transcript
Released 9/7/2021

PODCAST OPEN

Welcome to *Live Yes! With Arthritis*, from the Arthritis Foundation. You may have arthritis, but it doesn't have you. Here, you'll learn things that can help you improve your life and turn No into Yes. This podcast is for the growing community of people like you who really care about conquering arthritis once and for all. Take a moment to subscribe to, rate and comment on *Live Yes! With Arthritis* wherever you get your podcasts ... and never miss an episode. Our hosts are arthritis patients Rebecca and Julie, and they are asking the questions you want answers to. Listen in.

Rebecca Gillett:

Welcome to the *Live Yes! With Arthritis* podcast. I'm Rebecca, an occupational therapist living with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

Julie Eller:

And I'm Julie, a JA patient who's passionate about making sure all patients have a voice.

MUSIC BRIDGE

Rebecca:

Thanks for joining us on the *Live Yes! With Arthritis* podcast. It is Pain Awareness Month, and this month we're starting off a two-part series on mindful movement. As we know, Julie, movement is medicine when you have arthritis, so I'm excited to learn a little bit more about tai chi. And in our part two, we'll be talking about yoga.

Julie:

We're so excited to have our first special guest with us: Dr. Paul Lam, the creator of the Tai Chi for Arthritis program. He is a family physician and world leader in the field of tai chi for health improvement. The Arthritis Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention support his program, and Dr. Lam is a highly respected tai chi instructor. Millions of people have gained health benefits from his program. His instructional DVDs and books are global bestsellers, so he is our perfect guest to talk us through mindful movement for arthritis. Dr. Lam, welcome to the show.

Dr. Paul Lam:



Thank you for having me.

Rebecca:

Dr. Lam, before we get started, could you tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to use tai chi to manage arthritis?

Dr. Lam:

I have arthritis since I was 13, and by the time I graduated from medical school, it was pretty bad. I remember when I was a child in Chinese village, they were talking about tai chi can help arthritis, so I thought I would try that. And I have no idea how great it was. It transformed my life.

I've been teaching tai chi for 20 years' time, and I have arthritis for so many years. I am a doctor. It is really my job to create a tai chi for arthritis that's safe, effective and especially with the right teaching methods, so people get to like it and enjoy it.

Rebecca:

That's amazing.

Julie:

Yeah. Especially when you can take something that has been your personal experience and package it up and give it back to so many and really transform lives with it. That has to be a very rewarding thing, Dr. Lam. What makes tai chi different? What makes mind/body movement different from maybe other types of exercise and even other types of treatment for arthritis?

Dr. Lam:

Tai chi was created based on the law of nature. There's a lot of Chinese culture and traditional Chinese medicine. So, it incorporates that, and therefore it's unique, in its own way in the sense that it has Chinese medical idea of treating a human as a whole and strengthening people from inside. The mind is part of that.

So, in tai chi, it started from strengthening your inside, either in the muscles, your mind, make your mind more serene and therefore stronger, and imbue that internal energy, which, in the traditional Chinese medical terms is called chi. Chi means a life energy within every living being. The Chinese medicines approach is to strengthen your body from inside and improve your chi or correct the chi that's gone astray.



What would be the other difference is the way we modernize tai chi using western medicine to make tai chi safer and to make it easier to learn. And also to bring modern research into how people learn best. So, then we modified it, and we train our instructors to teach it in the way that is easier for people to learn, and will motivate people to learn, because it's enjoyable.

Rebecca:

Tai chi is a modern form of qigong, is that correct?

Dr. Lam:

That's right. Tai chi was created 400 years ago. Qigong was around for 1,000 years, and a lot of qigong has to do mostly with breathing and meditation, and so tai chi has that. But we are a unique form of qigong in the sense that everything is combined with moving.

We are made by nature to be active. Human made to be active. So, the activity strengthen our muscles, our joints, our internal organs. Tai chi's a combination of body and mind exercise. And I think a lot of qigongs are more in the breathing and mind, not so much in complete body movement.

Rebecca:

Not so much in the movement. So, what makes it different than yoga?

Dr. Lam:

When I look at some yoga pose, I understand there's meditations, but some of the pose were so high risk. That is something we don't do in, especially, my tai chi. I do know yoga teachers who come to do my tai chi and most of them then go back and modify their yoga practice.

Rebecca:

Yeah, definitely need to modify it.

Julie:

Of course. Dr. Lam, that's helpful to think about. I have never done tai chi before. I have been to a yoga class here or there, but I've walked through the park, and I've seen people doing tai chi. Could you describe the movements of tai chi and what that might look like so that we could kind of paint that picture and illustrate that for our listeners a little bit?



Dr. Lam:

OK, well, tai chi movement is slow. So, that allow you to integrate body and mind, allow you to be mindful. And it's very smooth. When you move smoothly, your mind becomes more calm and serene. And it's continuous. When it's continuous, then the energy inside continues to grow, and it's good for the muscles, too. Because when you move continuously, then there's less chance of injury.

And we also focus on postures. The right posture is being upright. When your body's upright and when you're breathing the right way, you activate the deep stabilizers, which will strengthen the spine. Your movements are focused on weight transference. Actually, the physical balance improves mental balance.

There's an enjoyment in feeling my body and moving it gently, and just a life energy that comes up. I don't know if I can give you a good picture, but your listeners can go to YouTube and Google me, and all my tai chi programs. The first lesson is free.

Julie:

I love that. I think often we talk about arthritis and chronic pain and things that we cannot control. And something that strikes me in your comments there are that tai chi is an expression of enjoyment of your body and something that your body can enjoy. Just listening to you and kind of your meditative way, Dr. Lam, I can feel that joy and reconnection with your body and with your mind for something like this. It seems very compelling and very nice.

I think a lot of folks think about exercise as high-intensity, crazy muscle movement, abrupt, pretty much the opposite of what you described.

Rebecca:

Right.

PROMO:

Check out the Arthritis Foundation's new app, called Vim, to help people with arthritis gain power over their pain. The app features expert educational content, a goal and activity tracker and opportunities to connect with others. It'll help you set attainable goals and achieve small wins that add up to big victories. Download the app at <https://www.arthritis.org/vim>, spelled V-I-M.

Julie:



What is some of the research or the medical evidence around using tai chi as a physical activity therapy for arthritis?

Dr. Lam:

There's an explosion of medical research on tai chi in recent years. Over 1,000 medical studies have shown just about everything. Hypertension, relieve pain in arthritis, relieve stress. Very importantly, improve immunity at this time of the lockdown period. People really appreciate what better immunity can do. The CDC has a website about tai chi, and they did include almost every aspect of health.

I think the mental part is very important. Because when people feel better about themselves, everything gets better. You know, people with diabetes, when they're more relaxed, their diabetes control gets better. And I have chronic pain, arthritis, for 60 years. I still got arthritis, but it's so well-controlled. And when I don't practice enough, I get more pain. Then I practice more, it gets better. At my age. I'm more flexible and stronger than people a third of my age. I'm 73, and I feel like, so healthy. And I still got my arthritis. But I work long hours, I feel...

Rebecca:

You keep moving.

Dr. Lam:

I really enjoy my life because of tai chi.

Rebecca:

Wow, that's amazing. As an occupational therapist, I hear a lot of benefits for balance and posture, which could also equate to, for people with arthritis and joint issues, helping with fall prevention. Is that another benefit that research shows?

Dr. Lam:

Absolutely. That's why CDC supported my program, because the world largest study for falls prevention in the community actually was funded by world health department but is run by a group of really good scientists. And they found that the rate of falls is reduced by 65%.

Rebecca:

Wow.

Dr. Lam:



And of course, there's other health benefits. I'll tell you another study by Professor Leigh Callahan. I think she have a lot to do with the Arthritis Foundation.

Julie:
She sure does.

Rebecca:
One of our champions for sure, yeah. She helped up with the Walk With Ease program, and she's a huge partner, yes.

Dr. Lam:
She has 354 subjects, which is the biggest study tai chi with arthritis so far in the world. And it was amazing. Two one-hour lessons a week, eight weeks only, people have less pain. They can do more physical activities than before, better balance, and they also feel better about themselves. And that's amazing for eight weeks.

Rebecca:
Eight weeks, yeah. I think I'm going to start myself now.

Julie:
I'm feeling exactly the same way. The more I hear Dr. Lam, the more I'm like, OK, sign up, go do it.

Rebecca:
One of the things, Dr. Lam, that Julie and I have really loved and taken away from the privilege of doing the podcast is: We've learned about incorporating mindfulness and meditation into our treatment plan, since we both have arthritis. This sounds like something that is just simple, gentle movement that could bring you joy, and just the sheer fact that you are moving. It sounds like tai chi is the perfect combination of movement and mindfulness for people.

Julie Eller:
In thinking about how tai chi can be incorporated as joyful movement, as movement for medicine, does it replace other kinds of workouts and other kinds of physical activity? Or is it something to add into your routine?

Dr. Lam:
Intrinsically, we are meant to be fast and slow, not just fast and not just hard, but also softness. We do find people do need to give it a bit of time. At least eight weeks, like



Professor Leigh Callahan's study. And we found that if we can keep people for three months, then they're likely to stay. So, people have got to give themselves time.

Can tai chi replace other activities? Well, for me, the major activity I do is tai chi. But I love walking, I love bicycling, and, in a way, because of tai chi, I've become more active in other things. So, everybody has their life, their individuality. I don't think I want tai chi to replace anything. I would like everyone to try tai chi and use it to enhance whatever else they're doing.

Rebecca:

If people are having a lot of joint pain, are there ways to modify tai chi if they're a little intimidated? Or let's say they have knee or feet issues and standing is a little difficult. Is there a way to modify it based on their joint needs?

Dr. Lam:

Absolutely. And that's why we create Tai Chi for Arthritis and train instructors with the Arthritis Foundation. We train our instructors how to modify it, and we also provide the seated tai chi course for arthritis, as well. Everyone is different, but if I can be generalizing, number one is: Be sure to stay very well within your comfort zone. And then, visualize anything you cannot do, you visualize you doing it, and visualization can help. And the Arthritis Foundation has this rule that if you do some activity or exercise that gives you pain for more than two hours, then you slow down. But sometimes people don't know how far they can go.

Rebecca:

Right.

Dr. Lam:

And that's why you need trained instructors to help them, to see, "Hey, you know, take it easy."

Rebecca:

Dr. Lam, can you tell us a little more about this specific Tai Chi for Arthritis program and how it can actually help people get started with a tai chi practice?

Dr. Lam:

Sure. So, the program has different levels. It started with a breathing exercise and then the core level that is really easy to learn. And then we teach people to adjust to the



level that they can take easily and also that include a sitter version if they need to. So, there's a, a range.

They start with warmup exercise, breathing exercise, then we give one step at a time, slowly, slowly build up their strength and their energy as they get better. How does it work? It's gently stretching all joints of the body. That, itself, helps people with arthritis. Gentle exercise builds muscles, improves flexibility, and then it's a lot of mind work. The moving itself induces you to be at a stage of more serene, more calm, but actually more alert, not sleepy kind of calm, but relaxed, more alert sort of calmness.

And of course, when you feel better about yourself and when you are calm and less stressed, then your pain gets better, your arthritis gets better. I guess the way to really find out how it works is for people to go ahead and do it.

Rebecca:
Right. Try it out.

Julie:
Yeah.

Dr. Lam:
Yeah.

Julie:
So often when you're dealing with chronic pain, at least in my experience, I like to compartmentalize that. Put it into as tiny a box as possible and then kind of close it away, put it away, and I can focus on the other things, as long as I don't tune in to that chronic pain, mentally or physically. Like, I can kind of walk away from it.

Something that's intimidating to me, sometimes about a mindfulness practice, meditation or even tai chi, is that it almost feels like you open up that box and you have to plug into it and let it out (laughs) of your container and kind of tune in. For people who are intimidated by that, Dr. Lam, myself included, what advice do you have for them in kind of getting in touch with their chi and opening up that box?

Dr. Lam:
In tai chi, you don't have to sit down, you don't have to try to meditate. You just do the gentle movements, and that just induce you. So, you don't have to open any boxes. It just trying to move in the slow, gentle, tai chi way, and try to breathe in a way that



improve your lung capacity, your internal energy. And they are very simple to do. And that is a good start. And then, as you find that's quite comfortable to do, you can do a little bit more, and you'll find that the pain gets less, or you can deal with it better.

PROMO:

*Overcoming chronic pain takes chronic strength. That's why, in honor of Pain Awareness Month, the Arthritis Foundation has partnered with iHeart Radio to recognize the Chronic Strength Champions who fight chronic pain every day. And to celebrate their small wins by giving away one big trip. Enter to win a seven-night, all-expenses-paid wellness retreat for two at Hilton Head Health in South Carolina, valued at \$10,000. The winner will enjoy gourmet cuisine, exercise classes in a beautiful island setting and much more. The Arthritis Foundation is boldly pursuing a cure for America's #1 cause of disability while championing the fight to conquer arthritis with life-changing science, resources, advocacy and community connections. So, say Yes to starting your wellness journey. Enter to win this once in a lifetime trip at ChampionSweepstakes.com. And explore the Arthritis Foundation's tools and resources to help develop your chronic strength. That's ChampionSweepstakes.com. Again, ChampionSweepstakes.com. **This sweepstakes ends on September 26, 2021.***

Julie:

Do you have to be outside to do a tai chi practice? Should you be? Can you be indoors? What's the best way to start?

Dr. Lam:

You can practice anywhere. For last 20 years, I travel around the world half a year to teach tai chi, and even in the airplane, in the tiny little seat, I do my tai chi every three hours, because I get really sick when I fly. But if I do my tai chi every three hours for one hour, then I don't get sick. Then I don't also get too tired. Just about anybody, air hostess, people sit next to me, know I'm doing tai chi. So, you can do it anywhere, really. You don't have to do it outside.

Julie:

For your actual tai chi session, how long should you be moving gently and breathing and following a tai chi ritual? Is it 10 minutes? 30 minutes? An hour? What does that look like?

Dr. Lam:

With Tai Chi for Arthritis program, the core six movements only take about one minute to complete, but the warmup exercise takes a bit longer. So, you can basically have any parcel of time. For the breathing exercise, you can do that anywhere, any place, for



any time. But generally speaking, study has shown, if people do any activity, gentle activity like walking, 40 minutes a day most days a week, which means four days a week, then they get reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, improved immunity, a lot of health benefits, just by being active for 40 minutes a day.

So, I believe if you do tai chi half an hour a day most days a week, four, five days a week, that would be just ideal to make you healthier and feel better and really improve arthritis.

Rebecca:

What are some things to look out for when you're looking for a local tai chi instructor or a class to attend?

Dr. Lam:

It's really important to find a teacher that you resonate with, a teacher that looks like he or she cares and he or she have some idea how to take care of people with conditions. We train thousands of instructors in the USA. Then, a lot of instructors teach virtually now. We have a guide how to teach it safely virtually. And one of the good things, if you find a local instructor, it's really good to go to their class. Ask permission, go to class, and watch yourself.

Is the teacher look kind, caring? And is other participants little bit like you or at least somewhat like you? Does he have regular attendance? And get the feel of it, because nothing like personally being someplace. He or she doesn't need to be perfect, but they need to care and learn how to teach in a way that make it interesting, easy and safe.

PROMO:

The Arthritis Foundation couldn't do awesome things without your support. Your donation fuels our powerful movement to advance arthritis research and resources, like this podcast and much more. Every dollar makes a difference. Give a gift now at <https://www.arthritis.org/donate>.

Rebecca:

Dr. Lam, it's been wonderful to learn so much from you about tai chi, and I'm really excited, actually, to try it. Before we go, we always like to ask our guests if you can share with our listeners your three takeaways to help them get started on a tai chi program for arthritis relief.



Dr. Lam:

My first is: Empower yourself and give it a try. When you do try tai chi, give yourself time. Allow yourself time to get used to the rhythm and feel something different. And take advantage of the virtual world that is so much easier to find right teachers. You can use my online lesson, which is like how I would teach people. You'll find this is a wonderful way to empower yourself to better quality of life, to take control with arthritis, like myself. I still have arthritis, but I can do anything, and my life is not limiting me. Arthritis is not limiting my life. But I work on it, and you can, too. I can do it, so can anybody.

Rebecca:

I love that. You are such an inspiration, Dr. Lam.

Julie:

Thank you so much, Dr. Lam. It's just been so wonderful to hear your calming voice and have just a lovely conversation with you about tai chi. Thank you so much for joining us.

Dr. Lam:

Well, likewise. Thank you everybody.

PODCAST CLOSE:

This Live Yes! With Arthritis podcast was brought to you by the trusted experts of the Arthritis Foundation. We're bringing together leaders in the arthritis community to help you make a difference in your own life in ways that make sense. You may have arthritis, but it doesn't have you. The content in this episode was developed independently by the Arthritis Foundation. To download our new Vim pain management app, visit <https://www.arthritis.org/vim>, spelled V-I-M. For podcast episodes and show notes, go to <https://www.arthritis.org/liveyes/podcast>. And stay in touch!