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Tai chi once a week cuts older adults' fall risk

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By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A new study suggests that practicing tai chi just once a week may help older adults lower their risk of falling, a major cause of disability in the elderly.

In a study of 702 adults age 60 and older, Australian researchers found that those who took tai chi class once a week for four months were one-third less likely to suffer a fall during the study period.

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese practice that focuses on building strength, balance and flexibility through slow, fluid movements combined with mental imagery and deep breathing.

Because it's a gentle form of activity, researchers have been interested in tai chi's potential benefits for frail elderly adults. Some studies have shown that the practice can improve balance and cut fall risk, as well as lower blood pressure.

The current study is different in that it looked at healthy adults who were relatively younger, with an average age of 69. It also used tai chi classes that were available in the community, rather than a program specially designed for the study, explained Dr. Robert G. Cumming of the University of Sydney, one of the study authors.

Together with past studies, he told Reuters Health, these latest findings offer enough evidence to recommend tai chi for fall prevention.

Cumming and his colleague report the findings in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.

The study involved 702 men and women who were randomly assigned to either take tai classes once a week for 16 weeks or to go on a waiting list for classes. All of the class instructors were experienced in working with older adults.

The researchers tracked fall rates in both groups during the 16-week course, and for another eight weeks after it ended.

During that time, there was no difference between the groups in the number of people who suffered one fall -- 15 percent in both groups. But those in the tai chi group were much less likely to fall multiple times; overall, their fall rate was 33 percent lower than the waiting-list group's.

Improved balance may have been key in this difference, the researchers found, as the tai chi group showed gains in various tests of balance and stability.

It's an important point, according to Cumming, that study participants saw benefits from taking tai chi classes available in their community, just once a week.

This, he and his colleagues write, suggests that tai chi is an "effective and sustainable" way for older adults to lower their fall risk.

SOURCE: Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, August 2007.

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