

Tai Chi, Qigong and the Treatment of Breast Cancer

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ABSTRACT

Tai chi and qigong are both forms of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). They have been used for centuries to treat a wide range of ailments and diseases, mostly in China and a few other Asian countries. They incorporate meditation, movement and breathing in a way that strengthens the body's immune system. In recent years, tai chi and qigong have become more popular in the West and have been increasingly used to treat many health problems. The present paper reviews some medical studies that have used these techniques to treat breast cancer survivors.

Keywords: Breast Cancer; Tai Chi; Qigong; Traditional Chinese Medicine; TCM

Introduction

Tai chi and qigong [pronounced chee-gong] are tools in the toolbox of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Qigong is very old, going back thousands of years. Tai chi is of a more recent vintage. Scholars cannot agree on when it started or where it started. It goes back at least to seventeenth century China, but it may be hundreds of years older than that, and it may have originated in India and been introduced into China by a monk from India. Tai chi and qigong overlap somewhat in their techniques and applications. Tai chi is a series of choreographed movements, somewhat like Japanese karate kata or Korean taekwondo poomsae, but performed in a much slower and relaxed manner. Although tai chi is a martial art and has martial arts applications, many modern teachers and students are more interested in its health benefits. It has been referred to as a form of moving meditation [1-4]. Qigong is also a form of moving meditation, although the movements are different. It is a set of exercises that focus on slow movement and breathing. Its movements are generally not choreographed, at least not in the same way that tai chi movements are choreographed [5-15]. It is not a martial art per se, but is a subset of tai chi. All tai chi incorporates qigong, but not all qigong is tai chi. One common feature of tai chi and qigong is that they both awaken and strengthen the body's immune system, making the body more resistant to disease [16,17]. TCM focuses more on prevention than cure, and tai chi and qigong are both examples of this approach.

Ba Duan Jin is one of the most popular qigong sets, not only for medical studies [18-38] but also among tai chi and qigong students [39]. It is relatively easy to perform, much easier than tai chi. Other popular qigong sets include Yi Jin Jing [40,41] Liu Zi Jue [42], Wu Qin Xi [43], Da Wu [44], Shi Er Duan Jin [45], Daoyin Yangsheng Gong Shi Er Fa [46], and Mawanhdhui Daoyin Shu [47]. Many studies in recent years have been conducted that use either tai chi or qigong techniques to treat a wide range of ailments [48-69]. The purpose of the present paper is to summarize some studies that have been conducted using either tai chi or qigong to treat survivors of breast cancer.

The Studies

Tao, et al. [70] Conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate the effects of acupuncture, Tuina, Tai Chi, Qigong, and Traditional Chinese Medicine Five-Element Music Therapy (TCM-FEMT) on quality of life (QOL) and various symptoms of cancer patients. They identified 67 RCTs totaling 5465 patients. Their tentative conclusion was that tai chi and qigong had no effect on QOL of breast cancer survivors, but that tai chi improved vital capacity of breast cancer patients. Zhang, et al. [71] conducted a bibliometric study that summarized the volume, breadth and evidence for clinical research on qigong. Their study examined 886 clinical studies conducted in 14 countries on 15 diseases/conditions, including breast cancer. They found that 97% of the studies

found better results from practicing qigong. The most frequently used qigong exercises were Ba Duan Jin (492 studies; 55.5%), followed by Health Qigong (107 studies; 12.1%), Dao Yin Shu (85 studies; 9.6%) Wu Qin Xi (67 studies; 7.6%) and Yi Jin Jing (66 studies; 7.4%). Pan, et al. [72] examined the results of nine RCTs that included 322 breast cancer patients. They found that the practice of tai chi significantly improved handgrip dynamometer strength and limb elbow flexion, but that no significant improvements were found for pain, interleukin-6, insulin-like growth factor, BMI, physical well-being, social or emotional well-being, or general health-related quality of life.

Luo, et al. [73] conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to evaluate the effect of tai chi on breast cancer patients that included 15 articles totaling 885 breast cancer patients. They compared tai chi with nonexercise therapies and concluded that:

- Tai chi had a significant effect on quality of life ($p = 0.001$).
- Tai chi had beneficial effects in 12 weeks ($p = 0.0003$) and 25 weeks ($p = 0.002$) for subgroups.

Meta-analysis of secondary outcomes found that:

- Three weeks of tai chi increased shoulder function ($p = 0.008$),
- Twelve weeks of tai chi improved pain ($p = 0.007$), shoulder function ($p = 0.004$), arm strength ($p = 0.0004$), and anxiety ($p = 0.001$).

Ni, et al. [74] conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 22 RCTs in order to assess the effects of tai chi on quality of life of breast cancer survivors. They found that tai chi improved physical and mental health, quality of life, and improved limb/muscular function. It also reduced the levels of cortisol, alleviated CRF and promoted sleep. Gao, et al. [75] investigated the effects of a mobile tai chi app and Facebook program on stress and quality of life. The study was a remote, 12-week two-arm parallel randomized control trial involving 35 female breast cancer survivors. Participants used the app to practice tai chi three times a day for at least five days per week. They also received Facebook health tips. The study found that those who did the tai chi exercises improved both mental and physical health significantly compared to the control group. Meng, et al. [76] reviewed 17 trials that included 1236 cases of female breast cancer survivors. They found that the practice of qigong resulted in significant improvement in the quality of life ($p = 0.002$), depression ($P = 0.02$) and anxiety ($p = 0.02$) but not fatigue ($p = 0.11$) or sleep disturbance relief ($p = 0.73$) compared to the control group.

Concluding Comments

It is becoming increasingly clear with each passing year that tai chi and qigong have something to offer to the Western medical community as more studies find that they can be used to treat a wide

range of ailments. They are very cost effective as well. What may be a problem, especially in smaller communities, is finding tai chi and qigong practitioners who can assist the medical community in offering these techniques to patients.

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