

Tai Chi 'can ease the pain of arthritis'



Researchers found that after just 12 weeks patients were in less than half as much pain as before they started performing the exercises.

The martial art was also significantly better at easing the affliction than traditional stretching movements.

Millions of people around the world practise Tai Chi every morning, for its purported physical and mental health benefits.

It is particularly popular in China where many flock to public parks to start their day with the slow, methodical movements.

Performed for centuries, Tai Chi is designed to promote relaxation and improve balance, strength and suppleness.

Previous studies have suggested that it could be helpful in the treatment of arthritis, but the results were unclear.

Researchers from Tufts University in Massachusetts decided to test the effect of the martial art on patients suffering from arthritis of the knee, a painful condition which afflicts tens of thousands of Britons and is particularly common in the elderly.

As well as suffering less pain, the study found that patients who took up Tai Chi were able to move more easily, were less depressed and were in overall better health within weeks.

A similar group, who had been asked to practise stretching exercises also felt better, but the effects were much less pronounced than in the Tai Chi group, and pain was reduced only by around 20 per cent.

Barry Phelan, a former British Tai Chi champion who now teaches the martial art in Kent, said that he had seen first hand the effect that Tai Chi could have on arthritis patients.

He said: "I have an 83-year-old woman in my class who when she first began taking lessons could not move her arms above her head.

"Now she can lift her arms and touch her toes and is very lively and active.

"She comes every week and Tai Chi has even helped her get over a number of operations."

Researchers believe that the exercises work by conditioning muscles and increasing suppleness as well as raising patients' overall feelings of wellbeing.

However, Dr Chenchen Wang, who led the study, called for more research to understand the exact reasons behind the martial art's effects, so that patients with other conditions apart from arthritis could potentially benefit.

He said: "Our observations emphasise a need to further evaluate the biologic mechanisms and approaches of Tai Chi to extend its benefits to a broader population."

During the study patients were asked to take part in a 60 minute Tai Chi class twice a week for 12 weeks and to practise for 20 minutes every day.

The researchers followed 40 patients, who had an average age of 65, the findings, published in the journal *Arthritis Care & Research*, show.

The NHS performs 65,000 knee replacements a year, many on patients with arthritis of the knee.

The condition is caused by wear and tear in the joint and is characterised by the progressive wearing away of the cartilage of the joint.