

Tai Chi versus Aerobic Exercise as an Intervention for People with Fibromyalgia

Full Summary:

The physical differences between tai chi and other moderate aerobic exercises are easy to see, but how do they compare as therapies for chronic conditions? A body of evidence suggests that tai chi has therapeutic benefits for musculoskeletal conditions. However, the relative benefits and harms of tai chi compared with aerobic exercise are unknown. For instance, can moving so slowly possibly be as good for us as taking a brisk walk?

Researchers at Tufts University, Brown University and the Center for Mind/Body Therapies conducted a prospective, randomized, fifty-two week, single blind comparative effectiveness trial to find out. The trial compared Yang style tai chi to other aerobic exercises among 226 adults with Fibromyalgia. 151 participants were randomly assigned to one of four tai chi groups, and 75 to an aerobic exercise group.

Fibromyalgia is characterized by chronic widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, and sleep disturbance, and affects between 2-4% of adults aged 18-65 worldwide. Accumulating contemporary research has demonstrated the beneficial impact of exercise interventions, and moderate aerobic exercise is now a standard component of therapies for fibromyalgia. However, many people with the condition struggle to adhere to such programs due to fluctuating symptoms.

Tai chi and aerobic exercise groups ran concurrently to eliminate seasonal effects on symptom severity. All groups were provided education on the importance of physical activity and were encouraged to practice at home. All supervised tai chi and aerobic exercise sessions were an hour long, and held once or twice a week for 12 weeks or 24 weeks.

Outcomes were determined using the [FIQR](#) scale, a validated multidimensional instrument that measures symptom severity, including pain intensity, physical function, fatigue, depression, anxiety and overall well-being. FIQR scores improved for participants in all five groups. Tai chi participants attend 62% of all classes versus 40% attendance for the aerobic exercise group.

A baseline evaluation was conducted before the start of the classes, and then three follow-up evaluations were conducted after twelve, twenty four and fifty weeks. Compared with baseline, FIQR scores improved for participants in all five treatment groups at each follow-up. Participants who did the tai chi program showed greater improvements than participants who did the aerobic exercise program.

The researchers concluded that “tai chi mind-body treatment results in similar or greater improvement in symptoms than aerobic exercise...for a variety of outcomes for patients with fibromyalgia. Longer duration of tai chi showed greater improvement. This mind-body approach may be considered a therapeutic option in the multidisciplinary management of fibromyalgia.”

Wang, Schmid, Fielding, Harvey. et al (2018). Tai Chi versus Aerobic Exercise as an Intervention for People with Fibromyalgia. *BMJ* 2018;360:k851

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-Summarized by Johnny Packard, 2/24