

Tai Chi May Boost Immune System



Benefit Seen in Older Adults After Taking Martial Art
By [Miranda Hitti](#)

March 29, 2007 -- [Tai chi](#), a traditional Chinese martial art, may give older adults' immune system a boost.

That news comes from experts at UCLA and the University of California, San Diego.

They included Michael Irwin, MD, who is the Norman Cousins Professor of [Psychiatry](#) at UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and the co-director of UCLA's Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology.

Irwin's team studied 112 healthy adults aged 59-86 (average age: 70) for about six months.

First, the researchers split participants into two groups.

One group took [tai chi](#) classes three times a week for 16 weeks. Each class lasted 40 minutes and included a set of 20 tai chi exercises.

The other group took a health education class -- with no tai chi lessons -- for the same amount of time.

Immune System Test

After the 16-week programs ended, the researchers gave all participants a single shot of Varivax, a [vaccine](#) that targets the varicella [zoster virus](#) that causes chickenpox and [shingles](#).

Participants had already had chickenpox earlier in life. The [vaccine](#) just served as a way to test their immune systems.

Over the next nine weeks, participants periodically had their [blood](#) tested to check for antibodies against the virus.

Those who had taken the tai chi classes mounted a stronger immune system response to the vaccine than those in the health education class.

By the end of the 25-week study, the tai chi students' immune system response was nearly twice that of the health education students.

Tai Chi a Vaccine Booster?

"These are exciting findings," Irwin says in a UCLA news release. He notes that age often dims the immune system response to vaccines.

The study "suggests that tai chi is an approach that might complement and augment the efficacy of other vaccines," such as the [influenza](#) vaccine, Irwin says.

Tai chi isn't just about working your muscles. Its slow, graceful movements also have a meditative aspect. It's not clear which aspects of tai chi were most helpful to participants in the study.

The report appears in the April edition of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

WebMD Health News Reviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#) on March 29, 2007

[Sources](#)

SOURCES: Irwin, M. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, April 2007; vol 55: pp 511-517. News release, UCLA.

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