

Tai Chi for Seniors

Daily Tai Chi Exercises for Health

by Sifu David Goldstein

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Preface:

If you have any questions about the appropriate amount of exercise you should do or the benefits of Tai Chi or whether or not these exercises are suitable for you, please ask your doctor or primary health provider.

If you have any questions or comments about the exercises described below, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Practice:

Tai Chi and Tai Chi-based exercises have been proven to be effective aids in the promotion and maintenance of health. There are many styles of Tai Chi and many practice regimens within each style. The practitioner should be guided by an experienced teacher as to which exercises are the most appropriate for him/her.

Although sessions with a teacher are essential to learn Tai Chi and Tai Chi-based exercises, true progress can only be accomplished through the daily performance of what you learn in these sessions.

Ten minutes once a day (preferably in the morning) is the minimum amount of time you should set aside for practice. Ten minutes in the morning and another ten minutes in the evening is twice as good.

It is better to spend 10 to 20 minutes a day practicing each day than to practice for two hours once a week. A small consistent amount of practice is required, but that is *all* that is required. The benefits will be enhanced strength, balance, and overall improved health.

General Comments:

The 70% Rule:

We always do 70% of our maximum - no more. So, if for a certain exercise you can do the motion 10 times, then only do it 7 times. If you can do it 5 times, do it 3. This goes for breathing as well. So when deep breathing - inhale to fill your lungs to 70% capacity.

The only exception to the 70% rule is **concentration**. For all exercises we must always focus on what we are doing 100% percent. Pay attention to as much detail as you can - the position of the body, head, arms, the feeling in the muscles and joints, the timing of the motion, etc. Not only does this engage the mind and strengthen the mind-body connection, but this is an important exercise for the mind – a sort of mental push-up.

General Timing:

In general, each exercise will go through some motion and then return to the starting position. To make things simple we will use the same timing for all exercises. Namely, take 3 seconds to slowly make the motion, hold for 3 seconds, then return to the starting position in 3 seconds. So our general timing rule is 3-3-3.

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Note: In general, Tai Chi does not hold any position. One who is performing a Tai Chi form will move smoothly from posture to posture like flowing water. In this paper, however, I am describing Tai Chi based exercises, designed to strengthen muscles and tendons, to increase flexibility, to release tension, to improve balance and to increase our body awareness. Therefore, I have included a **hold** stage to the exercises. This gives added workout to the muscles and, more important, added time to pay attention to the feeling the exercise is working on – e.g., stretching, relaxing, elongating the body or limbs, etc.

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Starting Position:

If you can, do the exercises while standing. If this proves difficult, then many of the exercises can be done sitting. In the description of each exercise I might say “Assume a good starting position.” This position depends on whether you are doing the exercise as a standing exercise or a sitting exercise, as I will now describe.

The starting position for standing exercises is as follows:

Stand with feet parallel, spread shoulder-width apart. Lift the crown of your head to the sky – chin tucked slightly in. It should feel as if a string attached to the crown, is pulling your head up and you are hanging from this string. The head and the vertebrae are like pearls strung on a string suspended from heaven. Your shoulders should be relaxed and down. Do not make any effort to pull them back – if anything, they should hang slightly forward. Tilt your pelvis in slightly to flatten out the curve in your lower back. Don’t try to overdo it. We want to straighten our spine from head to tail bone, but do not need a perfectly straight line. That would be unnatural and require a great deal of strain.

The knees should not be locked. Bend them slightly.

The starting position for sitting is as follows:

Sit straight with your butt to the back of the chair, hands folded in your lap. Lift the crown of your head to the sky – chin slightly in. Relax your shoulders.

Breathing

Breathing is a very advanced topic in Tai Chi. At this point all I want to say is “Breathe!” Breathe naturally, deeply, quietly. Later we will regulate when to inhale and when to exhale, but for now just breathe.

There is a type of breath called a *Cleansing Breath*, which is good to point out. To do a Cleansing Breath inhale slowly and deeply through the nose, then exhale quickly all at once through your mouth.

This type of breath is great for releasing tension and I suggest you take two or three Cleansing Breaths after each exercise, as I will point out below.

Standing or Sitting Exercises:

These exercises can be done either standing or sitting in a chair. In the beginning we will do each exercise 3 times before resting. If this is too much (beyond the 70% rule) then do less.

I. Stretch Head to the Heavens

1. Assume a good starting position.
2. Slowly stretch the crown of your head towards the ceiling. Stretch slowly, taking 3 seconds to reach your 70% of maximum stretch. Keep shoulders relaxed and chin in.
3. Hold the stretch for 3 seconds.
4. Take 3 seconds to slowly return to the rest position. Rest does not mean hunched over -- you should still be standing/sitting straight.
5. Repeat another 2 times. You may rest for a couple of seconds between repetitions if you wish.
6. Finish with 3 Cleansing Breaths.

Notes: When stretching notice the elongation of the spine, the release of tension in the neck and shoulders, the increased space between the vertebrae.

II. Hold up the Heavens

1. Assume a good starting position.
2. Hold both hands at heart level with palms up.
3. Slowly raise your hands towards the ceiling. As your hands pass your throat turn them over slowly so the palms are facing up. Continue to push upwards as if you are pushing up something heavy. Stretch slowly, taking 3 seconds to reach your 70% of maximum stretch. Keep shoulders and neck relaxed.
4. Hold the stretch for 3 seconds.
5. Take 3 seconds to slowly return to the rest position with hands at heart level. Rest does not mean hunched over -- you should still be standing/sitting straight.
6. Repeat another 2 times. You may rest for a couple of seconds between repetitions if you need to.
7. Finish with 3 Cleansing Breaths.

Notes: When stretching notice the elongation of the spine, shoulder, and arms. Stretch not only the arms, but the hand and fingers as well.

II. Stretch the Dough

In this exercise you will be imagining that you are stretching and then compressing a ball dough in a "playing an accordion"-type motion in front of your chest.

1. Assume a good starting position.
2. Hold your hands in front of your heart with fingertips touching. Imagine you are holding a rather heavy ball of dough about the size of a large grapefruit. Feel the weight of the dough in your hands.
3. Slowly pull the dough part, stretching your hands to either side while you take a deep breath in. Stretch slowly, taking 3 seconds to reach your 70% of maximum stretch. Keep shoulders and neck relaxed. At the end of the stretch your hands should be out to your sides about shoulder height.
4. Hold the stretch for 3 seconds, breathing naturally.
5. Inhale, then take 3 seconds to slowly push the imaginary dough back into a ball in front of your heart while exhaling. Feel the dough resisting the compression.
6. Repeat another 2 times. You may rest for a couple of seconds between repetitions if you wish.
7. Finish with 3 Cleansing Breaths.

Notes: When moving the dough, either stretching or compressing, try to use your hands and fingers as well as your arms. Try to imagine the weight of the dough and its resistance to your motion.

Summary:

This whole routine takes about 3-5 minutes. Try to do it several times during the day, but with plenty of rest in between. Do not overdo it. If it is hard to do all three exercises at once, then do the first, rest, do the second, rest, then the third. How much rest? You be the judge. Listen to your body and do not push beyond the 70% rule.

Standing Exercises:

In the beginning we will do each exercise only 3 times before resting. If this is too much (beyond the 70% rule) then do less.

I. Stand on Toes

1. Stand with hands on table or back of a chair or anything that will support you well while doing the exercise. Try to stand as straight as you can with your head stretched upward. For this reason it is better to use a higher support like the back of a dining room chair, since the table is low and you must bend forward to use it for support.
2. Slowly lift yourself by pushing off with your toes. You do not need to stand way up on your toes -- using our 70% rule, just lift enough weight off your feet to get the calf muscles to work. If you get your heels off the ground, then great. If you can only get most of your weight on your toes, then that is fine.
3. Hold the position for 3 seconds.
4. Take 3 seconds to slowly return to the rest position. Rest does not mean hunched over -- you should still be standing straight.
5. Repeat another 2 times. You may rest for a couple of seconds between repetitions if you wish.
6. Finish with 3 Cleansing Breaths.

Notes: When lifting yourself on your toes, stretch yourself upwards from the head. Certainly your calf muscles are doing most of the work, but *imagine* that your head is pulling your body and lifting it.

II. Knee Bends

1. Stand with hands on table or back of a chair or anything that will support you well while doing the exercise. Try to stand as straight as you can with your head stretched upward. For this it is better to use a higher support like the back of a dining room chair, since the table is low and you must bend forward to use it for support.
2. Slowly bend your knees lowering yourself down as if you were going to sit in a chair. No need to go too low. Use the 70% rule. Perhaps you will only move down a 5-10 cm. Bend the knees slowly, taking 3 seconds to reach your final height. Keep shoulders and neck relaxed.
3. Hold the position for 3 seconds.

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4. Take 3 seconds to slowly return to your full height.
5. Repeat another 2 times. You may rest for a couple of seconds between repetitions if you wish.
6. Finish with 3 Cleansing Breaths.

Notes: When lowering yourself down, try not to let your knees move too far forward. Therefore, in order to stay balanced you must lean your head slightly forward and move your butt slightly backward. This position maintains the center of your mass over the center of your feet. If you bring your weight forward over your toes, or backwards over your heels, it will be difficult to maintain balance. This movement is same movement you should use for sitting down in a chair or rising out of a chair.

II. Sift Weight

In this exercise you will be shifting weight slowly from one foot to the other. Take your time. You need not do the shift in 3 seconds -- it can take as long as you wish. While shifting weight imagine that the load bearing foot is full of water. In shifting your weight to the other foot imagine you are pouring the water from the load bearing foot slowing to the other foot. As the water moves to the other foot, it takes on more of your weight. The load bearing foot should feel warm and wet and the empty foot should feel dry and cool. Imagine the wet foot getting dryer and cooler as the weight is shifting off of it. Imagine the empty dry foot getting warmer and wetter as you shift your weight onto it.

1. Stand with hands on table or back of a chair or anything that will support you well while doing the exercise. Try to stand as straight as you can with your head stretched upward. For this it is better to use a higher support like the back of a dining room chair, since the table is low and you must bend forward to use it for support.
2. Slowly shift all your weight to your right foot. Now imagine the right foot is filled with water from the ankle down. It is wet and warm. Your left foot is dry and cool and empty (bearing no load).
3. As slowly as you need for your imagination to feel the imaginary water pouring, pour the water from your right foot to your left. This will "cause" you to shift your weight to your left foot. Feel the water emptying from your right foot and pouring into your left. Feel the right foot getting cooler, dryer, and lighter. Your left foot should be getting wetter, warmer, heavier.
4. When your weight is fully on the left foot, slowly pour the water back to your right foot, shifting all your weight there.
5. Repeat another 2 times if not beyond your 70% rule. You may rest for a couple of seconds between repetitions if you wish.

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Summary:

This whole routine takes about 3 minutes. Try to do it several times during the day, but with plenty of rest in between. Do not overdo it. If it is hard to do all three exercises at once, then do the first, rest, do the second, rest, then the third. How much rest? You be the judge. Listen to your body and do not push beyond the 70% rule.

WuHao Style Brush Knee and Strike

Sitting Exercise

We will do each hand separately. When we work on the right hand, hold the left hand perfectly still. Likewise, when we work on the left hand, hold the right hand still.

With each hand we will execute a strike, block, strike, block, strike, block. That is; we will do three full cycles, and then do three cycles (strike, block, strike, block, strike, block) with the other hand.

We start with both hands palm down in front of us at waist height. The left hand is a couple of centimeters above the left knee, and the right hand is a couple of centimeters about the right knee. There should be considerable bend in the elbows, so that the forearms are parallel to the floor. Now let's start with the right hand.

Drawing the hand back to strike

Inhale and slowly twist your body at the waist towards the right. As you twist, bring your right hand up towards your right ear. As you raise the hand, slowly rotate it so that by the time the hand reaches your ear the palm is facing the ear (Recall, the hand started over the knee palm down). The hand does not actually touch the ear, but it should be a few centimeters from your head at ear height in a comfortable position. The hand is now ready to strike.

The strike

Now exhale and slowly twist your body back to face straight forward. This gentle motion pushes the hand straight forward towards an imaginary target. Slowly rotate your hand so that when it is fully extended at shoulder height your palm is again facing down. Do not hyperextend or lock your elbow, simply extend your hand comfortably as far as you can while keeping your back and shoulders straight.

Return the hand to the original position, lowering it slowly palm down to just above the right knee. It should now be opposite the left hand, which should not have moved at all.

Now we are ready for the blocking move.

Drawing the hand back to block

Inhale and twist your body at the waist towards the left. As you twist, slowly bring your right hand across your body in an arching, circular motion, up towards your left ear. As your right hand reaches the left ear your palm should be facing away from your head (i.e., the back of your hand is near your ear).

The hand is now ready to block.

The Block

As you exhale, twist your body back to face straight forward. This motion moves the hand down in the same arch, crossing the body, palm down to its original position at waist height above your right knee. Imagine that you are knocking or pushing something aside. Do not overshoot. The hand

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should stop when it reaches to original position above your right knee, and should NOT move out to the right of the body.

You have now executed one strike and one block. Perform a strike, block combination two more times with the right hand.

The left hand

Now that you have performed three strike/block combinations with the right hand, hold the right hand perfectly still and execute three strike/block combinations with your left hand.

Summary

Inhale as you lift your hand for the strike or the block, and exhale as you strike or block.

Keep the other hand still, for now. Later we will learn to use both hands together.