

FITNESS
for Seniors

Get Moving with Tai Chi

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese exercise initially created for combat and self-defense that has evolved into a relaxing exercise technique that's good for both mind and body.

It's often called moving meditation and involves shifting the body slowly, gently and precisely in coordination with deep breathing.

AGING AND COGNITIVE DECLINE

A shift in cognitive abilities is normal as we age, including slower thinking, difficulties focusing, multitasking and word-finding, the University of California San Francisco says. It's related to physical changes in brain structures, such as the hippocampus, frontal lobe and temporal lobe. But it's not all bad news. The university says some thinking abilities can actually improve with age, including vocabulary, reading and verbal reasoning.

And while some decline is perfectly normal, there are abnormal deficits related to diseases such as dementia. A mild cognitive impairment is a medical term that indicates a decline in cognition greater than expected for a person's age, education or development, but one that does not interfere with a person's ability to carry



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out everyday tasks. Dementia indicates cognitive difficulties have progressed and are affecting a person's day-to-day life. Some common causes of mild cognitive impairment or dementia are Alzheimer's disease and Lewy body disease.

Risk factors for cognitive decline include:

- Type 2 diabetes.

- High blood pressure.
- Midlife obesity.
- Smoking.
- Depression.
- Little or no mental activity.
- Little or no physical exercise.

HOW TAI CHI CAN HELP

Tai chi can help, especially with those last two risk factors.

The National Institute on Aging reported in 2024 that participating in tai chi, particularly a class that includes a cognitive enhancement, such as challenging participants to spell words forwards and backwards during the movements, can boost scores on tests that measure cognitive impairment. People participating in

traditional tai chi improved their scores by one and a half points while people participating in cognitively enhanced tai chi improved three points. Researchers say tai chi, especially cognitively enhanced tai chi, can be an affordable way for people with cognitive impairment to see improvements in their quality of life.

Resistance Band Routines

Resistance band exercise routines use large elastic or fabric bands to improve balance, strength and mobility.

They're a lightweight, affordable option seniors can use at home to get fit without worrying about heavy weights or a gym membership. Always check with a health care professional before beginning any exercise routine.

These exercises from the British Heart Foundation can be performed sitting down or standing up, or in a combination of the two. To do the exercises, inhale as you begin the movement and exhale as you perform the movement. If you find it difficult, use a band with less resistance. Do these exercises two or three times a week, leaving a day between each session to help your muscles recover.



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PULL APARTS — TARGETS THE UPPER BACK

This exercise can improve posture and open your chest and is particularly helpful after you've fully healed from a heart procedure that involves a sternotomy.

- Sit or stand with feet hip-width apart. Hold the resistance band with both hands at shoulder level, shoulder-width apart, palms facing down.

- Keeping the arms straight, pull the band by moving your

hands out to the side until your shoulder blades squeeze together. Slowly return to the starting position.

- Repeat eight to 12 times.

Increase the difficulty: Start the exercise with your hands closer together.

BICEP CURLS — HELP WITH LIFTING LOADS

Bicep curls make for stronger arms that can help you manage carrying loads.

- Sit or stand with feet hip-

width apart.

- Place the middle of the resistance band under one or both feet. Hold each end of the band by your sides with your arms straight down.

- Slowly curl your hands up to your shoulders with the palms facing upwards. Keep your elbows next to your sides and squeeze your upper arms. Slowly release your arms back down to your sides.

- Repeat eight to 12 times. Decrease the difficulty:

Lower the resistance of the exercise by lifting one arm at a time.

LEG PRESS — MORE MOBILITY

This exercise can improve leg strength and mobility in your hips and knees.

- Sit or stand with feet hip-width apart. Place the middle of the resistance band under the middle of one foot.

- Hold the ends of the band tight in front of you at waist

height. Slowly lift the knee up, keeping the band under your foot. For sitting exercises, fully extend and straighten the leg in front of you as far as you can.

- Slowly press your foot down into the band and towards the floor. For those sitting, lift the knee back up, keeping the band under your foot. Repeat 12 to 16 times per leg.

Decrease the difficulty: Hold the ends of the band lower and closer to your feet to decrease resistance.

After Joint Replacement

Hip and knee replacement surgeries are fairly common among American seniors.

The University of California Davis says more than 1 million knee replacements and 760,000 hip replacements are performed in the U.S. each year and those numbers are expected to grow as the population ages.

WHAT IS JOINT REPLACEMENT SURGERY?

Ultimately, joint replacement surgery is a decision between the patient and specialist and can treat a variety of conditions. Done properly, joint replacement surgery can help patients avoid pain and live a better quality of life. Before going straight to surgery, UC-Davis says many specialists will recommend trying other treatments such as pain medications, physical therapy and injections. But once those treatments stop working, it may be time to consider joint replacement.

HOW LONG DOES RECOVERY TAKE?

Hip replacement patients will be sore immediately after surgery but can usually walk and put full weight on the joint right away. Physical therapy lasts about six weeks, UC-Davis says, and patients return to normal life afterward. At about



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three months out from surgery, patients are usually feeling better than they were before the procedure. Overall, the university says, full recovery takes about a year.

For knee replacements, the first few weeks can be painful. Right after surgery, patients can walk and put full weight on the leg, generally speaking. Physical therapy lasts about six to eight weeks and the knee may click occasionally. There may be stiffness when the

patient sits for a long time. By about three months, however, patients should be able to move pretty well and aren't in as much pain. They're generally back to their normal routine. Full recovery can take a year or more.

EXERCISES TO HELP RECOVERY

Kaiser Permanente recommends the following exercises to help with hip replacement recovery. Remember to ask

your health-care professional before starting an exercise routine. Don't lean forward while performing these exercises and don't bend the hip past 90 degrees. Keep your knees apart and don't let the affected leg cross the center of your body towards the other leg. Keep your toes pointing up toward the ceiling.

• Ankle pump: Lie or sit on a firm surface. Put your feet out in front of you. Point your toes and feet up toward your knees

as far as you can, then point them away from you as far as you can. Switch between pointing your feet up and down. Do this for two to three minutes or two to three times an hour.

• Glute sets: Lie on your back on a firm bed. Bend your knees and put your feet flat on the bed. Squeeze your buttocks together as tightly as you can and hold for six seconds. Repeat eight to 12 times.

Wyckoff Heights Medical Center recommends knee replacement patients start exercises within 24 hours of surgery, but warns people to avoid high-impact or strenuous activities to protect the new joint. Always talk to your health-care professional before doing exercises.

• Straight-leg raises: Lie flat on your back, keeping one leg bent with the foot flat on the floor. Hold the other leg straight and slowly lift it about 12 inches off the ground. Hold the lifted position for three to five seconds. Focus on tightening your quadriceps, the front thigh muscles. Slowly lower the leg back down without letting it touch the floor completely. Repeat 10-15 times, then switch legs. Aim for two to three sets daily.

• Heel slides: Lie on your back with legs straight and slowly slide the heel of your affected leg toward your buttocks, bending the knee as much as is comfortable. Hold the bent position for three to five seconds and slide the heel back down to straighten the leg. Repeat 10-15 times, two to three sets daily.

Improving Pelvic Floor Health

The pelvic floor supports organs in the pelvis, such as the bladder, bowel and reproductive organs.

Think of it like a sling, the Cleveland Clinic says, that holds the organs in place. These 14 muscles help with bodily functions, such as voiding waste and sex. As we age, these muscles can weaken. Here's how to keep them in top shape and improve bodily functions.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES WEAKEN?

The pelvic floor muscles give you control when voiding bodily waste or gas. They support proper posture and help with the functions related to sex, such as maintaining erections for men. Healthy pelvic floor muscles can squeeze and flex automatically and can protect you from embarrassing accidents.

Pelvic floor dysfunction means you can't properly relax or flex the pelvic floor muscles. They can weaken for injury, trauma and overuse. This can lead to conditions such as fecal incontinence, flatulence incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse, sexual dysfunction and urinary incontinence. A hypertonic pelvic floor, one that is too tight, can cause pain in the back, hip and legs; constipation; difficulty peeing; painful sex and pelvic pain. Talk to a



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health care professional about ways to relax pelvic floor muscles.

STRENGTHENING PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISE

Pelvic floor exercises are usually more recommended for women, but they can be beneficial for men to

strengthen their pelvic floors, too.

Kegel exercises are the most widely recommended pelvic floor exercise, the Cleveland Clinic says. To get started, sit or lie down comfortably. Squeeze the pelvic floor muscles like you're trying to stop a stream of urine for one second. Relax for

one second. Repeat four more times for two cycles per day. If it seems easy, try holding the squeeze for five seconds.

"Holding a Kegel for several seconds can be pretty challenging," says Cleveland Clinic gynecologist Dr. Amy Gee. "But the more you try, the more stamina you'll build. I try to tell

patients to work toward a five-second hold. If you can get there, you're doing really well."

If you tend to experience urinary incontinence, the clinic recommends doing a strong, quick Kegel right before the activity that causes leakage, such as coughing, laughing or lifting things.

Staying Fit while Traveling

Many people look forward to hitting the road after they retire. It's important to make regular exercise part of that dream, too, to keep you traveling and having the time of your life longer.

THE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE FOR SENIORS

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say regular physical activity can help improve sleep, reduce anxiety and reduce blood pressure. Long term, exercise can have even more benefits, such as improving heart and brain health, preventing cancer, improving bone strength and keeping people living independently. Physical activity may boost people's immune systems and improve balance and coordination, reducing the risk of falls.

STAYING FIT ON THE ROAD

Traveling brings its share of sitting and waiting, but it also brings opportunities to get moving. The AARP recommends looking for ways to make movement a part of your everyday travel activities, including walking to attractions and destinations instead of taking a car, choosing the stairs instead of escalators or elevators, taking short walks at the airport while waiting to board,



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and incorporating easy exercises such as leg lifts and arm circles, even while sitting.

You can work in more complex exercises using affordable, easy-to-carry accessories such as resistance bands. You can plan to do isometric and body-weight exercises, such as planks, that require no equipment at all. Gentle yoga

movements or tai chi can provide exercise and relaxation and you'll need nothing more than a comfortable place to move.

STAY CONSISTENT

It's important, the AARP says, to establish a daily routine and stick to it. This workout takes 15 minutes and can be slipped

into daily travel plans.

- Do eight to 15 squats, based on your fitness level.
- Follow that with eight to 15 push-ups.
- Hold a wall sit for 30 seconds.
- Hold a plank for 30 seconds.
- Repeat this routine two more times.
- At the end, hold 60-second

stretches for your hamstrings, quadriceps and calves.

In addition to regular exercise, stay hydrated, eat well and avoid overexertion, especially in new climates. Look for hotel and community fitness classes and incorporate movement into your travel plans with walking tours, hikes or bike rides.

Fighting Gym Intimidation

Gyms provide a great way to get physical, mental and social activity, which can help seniors stay mobile and independent longer.

But walking into a new gym full of often young, fit people can be intimidating, especially for people who are new to working out. Always ask your health care professional before starting a new exercise routine and, if the gym offers it and you can afford it, consider booking a couple of training sessions to learn your way around the facility and equipment.

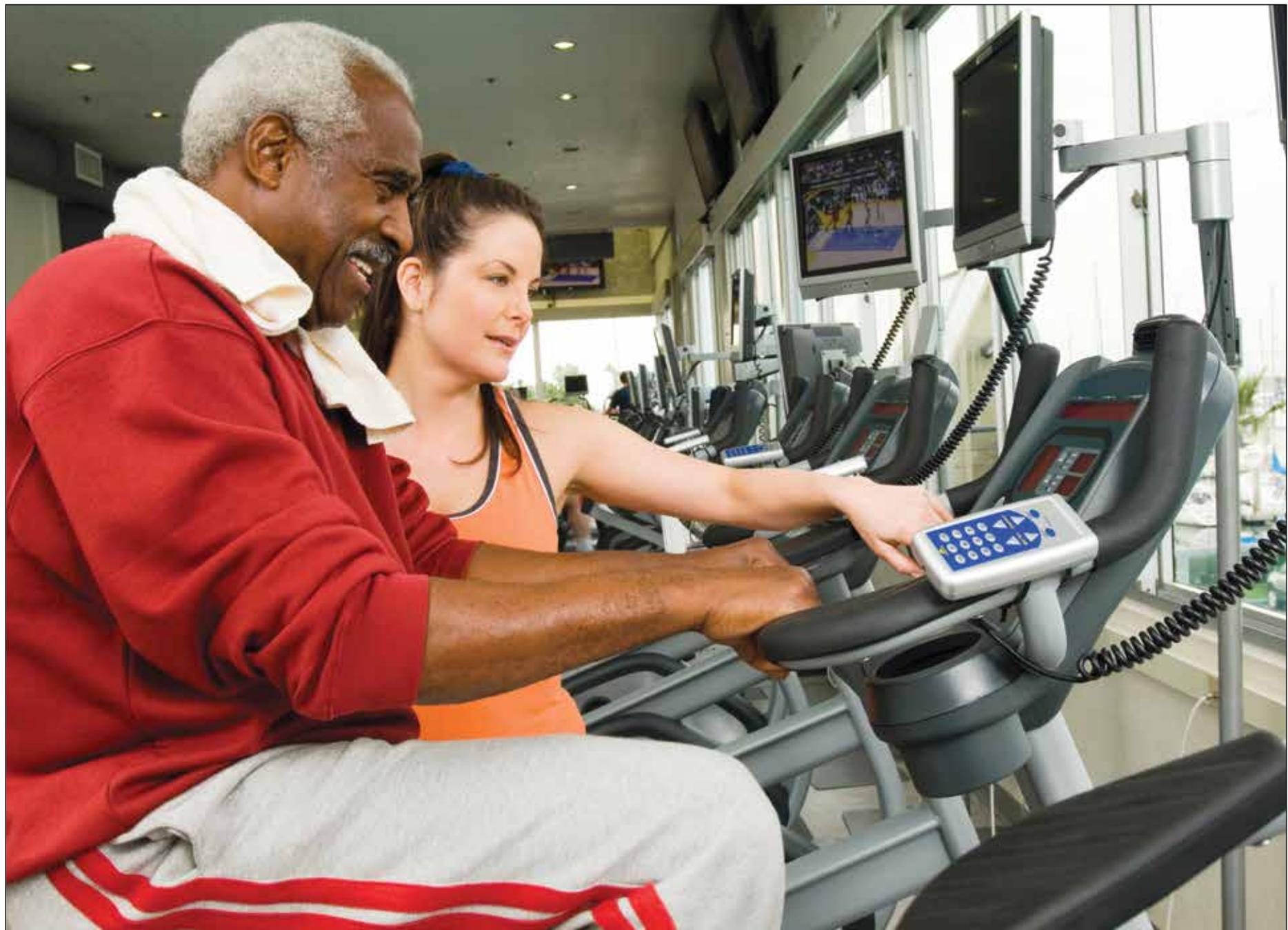
WHY EXERCISE?

Before you walk into the gym, let's review the benefits of overcoming the fear of the gym. The National Council on Aging outlines these benefits of exercise for seniors:

- Exercise prevents bone loss and may even actually restore bone density. Having stronger bones leads to fewer fractures and can help balance.

- Regular exercise can relieve osteoarthritis pain, lessening the pain and stiffness of arthritis by strengthening the surrounding muscles to take pressure off the joints. Do low-impact cardio exercises, strength training and range-of-motion exercises.

- Exercise can prevent chronic disease and boost



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immunity, NCOA says, and can even help reduce cognitive decline.

COMBATting GYM ANXIETY

Warding off the intimidation factor starts before you even go through the door. The Cleveland Clinic suggests starting by understanding your triggers, such as a lack of

experience, social anxiety and self-consciousness. Starting out with doing some research online or by talking to friends can help allay your fears and get you more familiar with the gym before you walk in.

You can ask for a tour, the Cleveland Clinic says, before you even sign up. A knowledgeable member of the gym's staff will take you around and

show you where the locker rooms and showers are, and can show you the equipment, class schedules and other amenities you may want to use. Make a list of questions before you go and tell the staff there that you're just starting out or are returning to the gym after a long break. That will help them tailor the tour to your needs.

One of those questions should be when the gym is most busy. Typically, gyms are more crowded right before and right after work hours. If you can, try to schedule your workouts outside of those hours. Fewer people may lessen your anxiety. So can bringing a friend, who can help put you at ease and help hold you accountable.

Exercise to Build Bone Density

Loss of bone density is another typical part of aging that can fly under the radar until it doesn't.

Bone density is the measurement of the amount of minerals present in a specific area of bone, primarily calcium and phosphorus. Those minerals make up 65% of bone tissue, the National Council on Aging says, and give the bones hardness and rigidity. After age 50, we lose bones faster than we can build them. In the years after menopause, women can lose up to 20% of their bone density, causing the bones to become weaker and more susceptible to fracture.

Certain kinds of exercise can help strengthen not only your muscles but your bones, the Mayo Clinic says. Here are some exercises it recommends. Talk to your health care provider to make sure it's safe for you to exercise before beginning.

- **Walking:** This is an easy one that can help reduce the risk of hip fracture by half, the Carrell Clinic says. Aim for a brisk walk for 30-45 minutes per day. You may have to gradually work up to that time and that's fine. Take your time, be careful and stay with it.

- **Walk and stomp:** Jolts can stimulate bones, the AARP says, which may not happen on your neighborhood stroll. While walking, stomp each



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foot two or three times every 10 steps or so. Imagine, the association says, you are crushing a can.

- **Stair climbing:** This exercise forces your body to resist gravity as you climb and strengthens leg and hip muscles that support your pelvic bones. Use the handrails and consider adding the occasional stomp for bone stimulation.

- **Push ups:** Do these against a wall or on the floor, with or without bent knees. Extend your arms and put your hands together shoulder-width apart. Tighten your abs and bend your arms, lowering your torso toward the wall or floor. Push yourself back up and do this three to five times. Rest and repeat a second set.

- **Squats:** Stand with your feet hip-width apart and bend

at the knees slowly into a controlled squat. If you need help balancing, rest your hands on a sturdy chair or table. Squat as far as you can, but don't let your butt fall below your knees. At the bottom of the movement, tighten your buttocks and use your butt and thigh muscles to return to a standing position. Repeat eight to 12 times.

- **Leg lifts:** This exercise

works the muscles around your hip bones which are vulnerable to fractures. Place your hand on a counter or against a wall for balance. Set your feet hip width apart and shift your weight onto your inside foot. Straighten your outside leg and lift it out in front of you until your right foot is about six inches off the floor. Repeat eight to 12 times, then shift to your other side.