

LSU professor uses tai chi to fight degenerative nerve disease

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Peripheral neuropathy is a degenerative nerve disease with no cure and few effective treatment options – until now. Li Li, professor of kinesiology at LSU, is conducting a study into the benefits of tai chi for elderly peripheral neuropathy patients. So far, those practicing tai chi show far greater levels of improvement than those pursuing more traditional methods of treatment.

Test results prove tai chi is more than just a mind game or a placebo it really works. Li's group conducts periodic scientific and medical testing to track each person's progress as they continue in the program. Other, more traditional methods of treatment, including walking and light machines, are also studied to compare the results to those gained from tai chi, but so far it is still the undisputed winner, producing improved flexibility, sensation and overall health.

Most patients report a significant decrease in falls, increased confidence walking and standing and are able to stop using walkers or canes after consistent and extensive participation.

The study, backed by little to no funding, started out in the summer of 2004 and was slated to last only a few months. But participants felt such improvement that they refused to give it up. So, in the fall of 2005, the study resumed with great anticipation and with funding from LSU's Department of Kinesiology. What was once a simple comparison between two forms of exercise walking and tai chi has now developed into a full-fledged study, utilizing the expertise of biomechanists,

psychologists, physiologists and many others in order to gain a better understanding of the actual impact this exercise produces.

The program includes approximately 75 individuals, with breakaway groups meeting up to three times a week for lessons. Thomas Yajun, a tai chi master who moved to the United States only three years ago knowing little to no English, leads the classes through their routines, which take into consideration the group's general level of mobility. As they become more comfortable and gain more mobility, Yajun pushes them farther, constantly expanding their boundaries. "People wouldn't come if it wasn't doing something," Li said. "I mean, some of these people travel 50 to 100 miles round trip just to make it to our classes. For many of them, if they couldn't come to our sessions, which are offered free of charge, they couldn't afford to go anywhere else."

There are more than 150 people in the Baton Rouge area waiting to join Li's study. But with only LSU's Department of Kinesiology sponsoring the program, it cannot support any additional participants. Parking and facility space are already posing a problem. Li hopes to receive funding in the near future that will allow him to expand the program so that it can help others fight back against the pain of peripheral neuropathy.

"I have really been helped by the program. My legs felt like they had bands around them and my feet would burn almost constantly. Since I've been here [approximately nine months], I've had only two episodes of severe burning and the bands, where as it was on a daily basis before," said Marian King, who, prior to joining the program was forced to stop working due to increasing difficulty with walking and standing.

"We're seeing great results, and we're very excited," Li said. "Some people started the program unable to stand, even with assistance, for more than five minutes. Today, these same people have no trouble standing independently."

"I was falling down in the house a lot. Sometimes I would fall down just by tripping. It's [tai chi] been a real improvement," said John Liebert, who only recently joined the program. "I fall down far less, and that's the big issue with me. It's not going to cure the disease, but it was never intended to be a cure. It has definitely helped my lifestyle. It's been a real improvement."

Source: Louisiana State University

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