Benefits of Sitting Tai Chi Under Investigation

Tai Chi, a slow, choreographed, individual dance often done in groups and primarily performed while standing, is a proven intervention for pain, mobility, depression and even some autoimmune diseases in community-dwelling adults and more able-bodied long-term care residents. The idea to study sitting Tai Chi came from a statement by a nursing home administrator who asked, “How do you assess and treat people who fall out of their wheelchairs?”

To answer this question, a collaborative research partnership was formed between Lawrence Faulkner, PhD, OT/L (College of Allied Health Sciences), Veronica Engle, PhD, RN, FAAN (College of Nursing, UTHSC), and Master of Occupational Therapy research students. In 2005-06, Dr. Faulkner and the MOT students focused their efforts on standardizing a new sitting balance measure, the Sit and Reach Test (SRT), using community-dwelling adults and older adults.

Dr. Engle, a certified Tai Chi for Arthritis instructor, directed a six-month Tai Chi for Health program in five nursing homes, funded by the state of Mississippi. For safety it was decided to limit the Tai Chi program to sitting Tai Chi. In 2006-07, Dr. Engle, Dr. Faulkner and the MOT students validated the SRT, comparing data from nursing home residents and community-dwelling older adults. Outcomes from the nursing home Tai Chi program also showed significant improvement for a reduction in pain medication use and improved balance and mobility.

For 2007-08, the H.W. Durham Foundation is providing funding for Dr. Faulkner and Dr. Engle to investigate the “Efficacy of a Sitting Tai Chi Program for Assisted Living Residents.” The objectives of this prospective research program are to investigate the effects of a six-month seated Tai Chi program, and continue to refine the protocol of a sitting Tai Chi health promotion program for frail or at-risk older adults. The MOT students have collected data on general health, pain, balance (including the SRT), mobility, fear of falling, activities of daily living and quality-of-life at baseline, and in March for the three-month interval. A final assessment will occur in May/June. Based on our residents' comments so far, positive outcomes are expected. Stay tuned!