

Qigong Training for Relief of Arthritis

Chinese Medicine's View of Arthritis

In traditional Chinese medicine [TCM], an imbalance in vital internal energy (Qi, or bioelectricity, in scientific terms) is seen as the root of many diseases. Qi imbalance occurs well before the physical symptoms of disease manifest themselves. TCM's primary focus is on preventing disease by cultivating internal energy and maintaining its balance within the body through Qigong exercise, diet, herbs, acupuncture and other treatments. Prolonged imbalance leads to disease and once the disease occurs, one must address the root cause of the disease and rebalance the body's qi to cure it.

TCM views arthritis as arising from a number of different causes: joint injuries, aging, weakness in the internal organs, heredity, and joint weakness from lack of exercise. Overall Qi deficiency is also seen as a cause of arthritis. Depression, for example, can lead to qi deficiency and arthritis.

Two-Stage Approach to Relieving Arthritis

The first step in dealing with arthritis is to restore a proper supply of qi and blood to the body cells affected by the disease so that the damaged cells can be replaced and the integrity of the joints restored. Thus, treatment begins with relaxation of the area of the affected joints in order to increase the circulation of blood and Qi in the affected areas. This state, which will take several months, will be followed by the second stage of treatment, which is to strengthen the muscles and tendons to prevent future damage to the joints.

The Qigong Approach to Healing Arthritis and Other Diseases

Qigong exercise is one of the main tools used in TCM for preventing and healing disease, and it takes a comprehensive approach to the problem involving the practitioner's body, breathing, mind, internal energy and spirit. Qigong emphasizes not just working on the areas directly affected by disease, but also on rebuilding overall health and strengthening the spirit of the practitioner.

Strengthening and firming the spirit is a particularly important part of the qigong approach to treating diseases. Practitioners will change how they look at life in general and at the tasks of maintaining their health and defeating illness. By understanding and practicing the Qigong approach to health, they will cease to regard themselves as passive victims of bad luck or ill-fate and instead to take charge of their lives and health and accept that they have the power to improve their lives and well-being.

Basic Principles of Qigong Training for Relief of Arthritis

In taking the Qigong approach to health and healing, it is very important to understand how the Qigong training works and what to expect from the training.

Relaxing the Body: The Qigong treatment for arthritis begins with relaxed and gentle movements to smoothly increase Qi circulation. The first stage of treatment is to learn how to relax and avoid muscle/tendon tension and stress, which can increase pressure on the joint and continue to damage it. You must also place your mind on the arthritic joints. The more you bring your mind deeply into the joint and relax it, the more Qi will circulate smoothly and freely to repair the damage.

As you continue your Qigong practice, work on attaining a level of relaxation where your mind can reach deeply into the organs of the body and to the muscles that surround the organs. Lying down, sitting and standing Wuji meditation are the best means of training to achieve this level of relaxation. When you have reached this deep level of relaxation your Qi will flow smoothly throughout the body and you will be able to lead the qi deeply into arthritic or injured joints where it can repair the damage.

Deep, Relaxed Breathing: Using Qigong to cure arthritis, breathing should be long, slow, deep, even and calm in order to be able to lead the Qi deeply into the joints and on exhalation lead the Qi outward to remove excess or stagnant Qi which may have accumulated in the joints. Visualize that you are breathing in and out of the damaged joints. Use only 70 to 80 per cent of the lungs capacity so that your breathing is deep, but still relaxed.

As you continue to practice Qigong for arthritis, work on skin and marrow breathing. When you exhale, you lead Qi to the skin surface, imagining that your body is like a balloon being inflated and expanding all around. When you inhale, lead the Qi into the bone marrow and internal organs.

Calm and Focused Mind: The mind plays a very important role in Qigong. Your mind should be calm, relaxed and focused on the feeling inside your body so that you can sense the Qi. If your mind is distracted, gently bring in back to focus within your body.

The final goal of regulating the mind in Qigong is to attain a calm and inward focused state of the “thought of no thought” where your mind is free from the influences of the present such as worry, happiness, and sadness. When you reach this state, you will be able to relax deeply into your bone marrow and internal organs.

Raising the Spirit: Fighting spirit is vitally important in the battle against disease just as it is on the battlefields of war. Fighting spirit is the root of a person’s patience, perseverance and endurance. Soldiers in war can have a high fighting spirit if they know why they are fighting, know how to fight and have confidence in victory. The same is

true with Qigong. Will, patience and endurance are the keys to victory in the use of Qigong to heal chronic illness.

General Principles of Qigong Exercises for Arthritis

Early morning is the best time to practice Qigong, even though your pain and stiffness may be most severe at this time. Massage and Qigong exercise in early morning will relieve Qi stagnation and lessen the discomfort for the rest of the day. Gently and lightly massage the joints until they are warm and the Qi circulation has increased, then gradually and gently start the Qigong exercises.

You should also do the exercises just before going to bed to relieve any Qi stagnation. This will speed the repair and healing of the joints as your sleep and lessen the pain and stiffness the next morning. If you are able, add another practice session in the afternoon, when Qi is normally the strongest. If you have the time, you can do the exercises at other times as well.

1. When your joints are inflamed, moderate your Qigong exercise. Also, gently massage the joints.
2. Take advantage of the times when you have less pain and stiffness to exercise a little more than usual.
3. Practice a comfortable length of time and gradually increase the repetitions.
4. Don't overdo the exercises. If you still have significantly more pain than usual two hours after exercising, you probably over did the number of repetitions or over extended the range of motion.
5. Place your mind deeply inside the joints you are exercising and imagine that you are breathing into and out of the joints. This visualization will help to lead the blood and Qi to into the joints to promote healing.
6. Avoid exposing your joints to cold, dampness and wind. After exercise, cover your joints and keep them warm. Dress warmly and comfortably at all times.

You should start to see improvement after three months of consistent practice.

Specific Qigong Exercises for Arthritis

Neck: Blood and Qi must flow through the neck to reach the brain. Arthritis in the cervical spine, injuries to the neck and tension in the neck muscles can interfere with the flow of blood and Qi and lead to impaired brain function, memory loss and premature aging. It is important to pay attention to the neck to prevent this. When exercising the neck, however, ***avoid bending the neck backwards.***

1. **Look left and look right.** With eyes open or closed, concentrate the mind on the neck. Feel the movement of the joints. Turn the head slowly from one side to the other. Do the exercise sitting or standing. Exhale while turning to the side,

inhale while turning to the center. Repeat until the neck warms. It may take 20-50 repetitions.

2. **The head spins and the earth turns.** Rotate the head clockwise 20-50 times. Then rotate counterclockwise 20-50 times. Make sure that you rotate gently upward and downwards, right and left and **not backwards**.

Spine: Any problem in the spine can cause Qi stagnation in the Governing Vessel, which supplies Qi to the six yang meridians. Therefore, TCM plays a lot of attention to strengthening the spine and maintaining Qi circulation in the Governing Vessel.

1. **Large dragon moves its body.** Generate a wave-like motion at the legs and move it up the body to the sacrum and finally to the neck. The motion can be side to side or forward and backward. Interlock the fingers and move the hands and arms along with your body. Keep your mind focused on your spine. Can be done sitting or standing. Keep as relaxed as possible. Do 20-50 times until your spine feels warm.
2. **Large dragon turns its body.** As above, but add twisting the waist to turn from side to side. Turning uses the trunk muscles to rotate the vertebrae, which increase the mobility of the spine.

Waist: Be very careful when exercising the waist. Moving too vigorously can injure the lower back and spine. Proceed slowly and carefully.

1. **Rotating the waist.** Keep head and feet in place as you gently and smoothly move your waist in a circle. Circle ten to twenty times in one direction then do the same number of repetitions in the opposite direction. Focus the mind on the waist area as you move and try to feel the movement of the vertebrae inside the body.
2. **Lion rotates its head.** Keep your legs and waist in place and swing the upper body in a circle. Can be done sitting or standing. Move gently. Move ten – twenty times in one direction, then the same number in the opposite direction.
3. **Bend and straighten the waist.** Commonly used to massage the kidneys by tensing and relaxing the back muscles and to clear waist problems and back pain. Relax the body as much as possible and then bend forward. Stay bent for about five seconds, and then straighten up. Repeat ten-twenty times. As the waist strengthens, you may increase the number of repetitions. Keep the mind focused on the waist area.

Hands, Fingers, and Palms: TCM has found that people who use their hands a lot are sick less often. This is because using the hands builds Qi in them and then the Qi flows into the six primary channels in the hands and nourishes the internal organs.

1. **Swimming Octopus.** (also works on the wrists). Stretch your hands forward while spreading out the fingers. Then draw the wrists back while closing the

- fingers. You can do one or both hands at a time, sitting or standing. Do 30-50 repetitions.
2. **Flying Finger Waves.** Bend your thumbs and fingers one after the other and then straighten them one at a time, repeating the motion in a wave. Bend only the knuckles closest to the hands. If you bend the other knuckles you will fail to develop the base of the fingers. Do 20-50 repetitions. After practicing relax your arms to allow the Qi that has accumulated in your hands to circulate to your arms and body.
 3. **Tiger Claw Training.** This exercise is more strenuous than the others above. Be careful about how much tension you generate. If your arthritis is serious, you should probably not tense your muscles until your condition has improved, and then you should increase the tension very gradually. Hold your hands like a tiger's paws. Gradually pull all your fingers in to the center of the palms. Then open your hands again to the tiger's paw shape. After 20-50 repetitions, your fingers and palms should be very warm. When finished, relax your arms and allow the Qi to flow freely into your body.
 4. **Rolling Balls.** Hold two small wooden or ceramic balls in each hand and move them in a circle with your fingers. Your hands should feel warm after five to ten minutes. Practice three or four times a day.

Wrists: Once your arthritis has improved, you may start rebuilding the strength of your muscles by increasing the tension in your hands as you do the following exercises.

1. **Rotating the Wrists.** Relax your wrists and move your hands in circles. Keep your attention on your wrists to feel the rotation and make it as smooth as possible. Keep rotating until your wrists are warm, and then reverse and do the same number of repetitions. It may take 300 or more repetitions until your wrists start to feel warm.
2. **Rotate the wrists with interlocked fingers.** Lace your fingers together and move both hands in circles. Keep your attention on your wrists, and practice the same number of repetitions in both directions. Once you have rebuilt your joints, this exercise can also be very helpful in rebuilding the tendons and muscles in your wrists. To do this, simply increase the tension on the wrists.
3. **Rotate the Wrists while Holding Hands.** This exercise is very similar to the previous one, only now your hands are grasping each other.

For more information on using Qigong to heal arthritis, see the book and DVD by Dr. Yang Jwing Ming, *Arthritis: The Chinese Way of Healing and Prevention*