

## THE Good Housekeeping\* GUIDE TO...

## Tai chi

In our new series of beginners' guides, we look at exercises you may never have tried. This month, we discover tai chi, qigong and all ways to improve flexibility and coordination, and calm an over-anxious mind

You may have seen people in the park in what looks like a graceful solo dance, slowly moving their hands and swaying. And you may have wondered what they were doing. It was probably tai chi or qigong (also known as chi kung), both ancient Chinese moving meditation practices that use breathing exercises and repetitive, slow movements. Tai chi is a martial arts form of qigong but there are roughly 7,000 other forms, says teacher Mimi Kuo-Deemer. Qigong is part of Chinese medicine, has existed in some form for thousands of years and is still hugely popular in China.

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HEALTH WATCH

## BUT IS IT REALLY EXERCISE?

It's a low-impact, gentle form of exercise that's probably one of the best researched in the world. Don't do it to burn calories, says Mimi. 'It conditions the spine, legs and feet, building strength, making the muscles longer and stronger.' Last year, *New Scientist* reported that tai chi and qigong change the body at the genetic level, turning off inflammation genes. In Chinese medicine, the benefits are explained in terms of increasing qi (your energy) by unblocking meridians (energy pathways). One review in the *American Journal Of Health Promotion* said there is good evidence for nine main benefits, including bone density, physical function, preventing falls, quality of life, psychological benefits and immune function. 'The gentle fluid movements promote the flow of the lymphatic system, the primary system of immunity,' says Mimi. Other reviews suggest it can reduce depressive symptoms, stress and anxiety.

## HOW TO GET STARTED

Start with a simple routine on YouTube or a DVD, or find a teacher at [taichiunion.com](http://taichiunion.com). 'If you have an injury, take the advice of your healthcare practitioner,' says Mimi. 'Most of the movements are safe for most ages and experience levels. It's about being in line with where we are in life and not resisting it but rather embracing and celebrating it.' Check out her DVD: *Qigong Box Set For Health, Vitality & Balance* on Amazon or download videos at [mkdeemer.com](http://mkdeemer.com).

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## WHAT KIT WILL I NEED?

Nothing more than comfortable, loose clothing. When you're inside, you can do the movements barefoot, but if you're outside, it's a good idea to wear soft shoes.

## HOW OFTEN SHOULD I DO IT?

As a beginner, 15 to 30 minutes, three to five times a week, is a great start. Ideally, you would work up to practising every day.

## 'IT HELPED ME PUT MY LIFE BACK TOGETHER'



When Julia Thompson's marriage fell apart five years ago, doing yoga helped with the heartache. 'At Triyoga, I met Mimi, who introduced me to qigong. Instantly, I loved the slow, graceful, repetitive and flowing movements,' says

Julia, 54. 'Now, I try to practise every day, even just for 10 minutes. I love the feeling of strength and power, as well as the lightness and fluidity I feel in my arms and spine. Now, the pain I've had for years in my knee has practically gone, and practising regularly keeps my sciatica at bay. Qigong grounds my body and stills my mind. It helps me deal with life's up and downs in a more graceful way.'

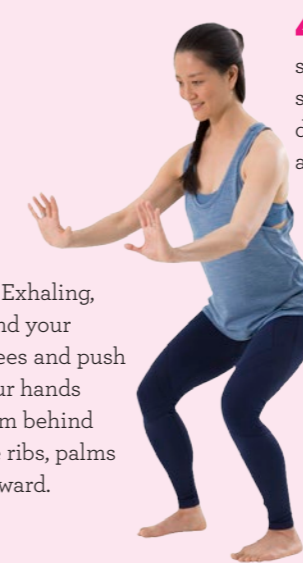
## Your first moves

In the Chinese medicinal theory of Five Elements, each element – Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water – is linked to a different organ. This Metal set of movements from qigong is for the lungs

**1** Start with the feet together, hands by the sides.

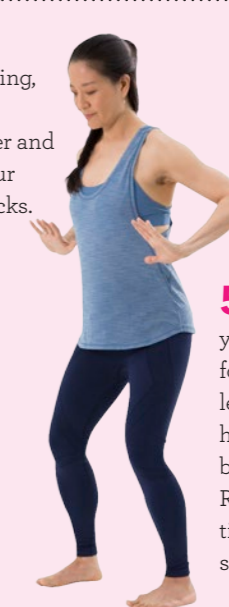


**2** Inhaling, step one foot to the side as both hands lift forwards and up, palms up, then towards you.

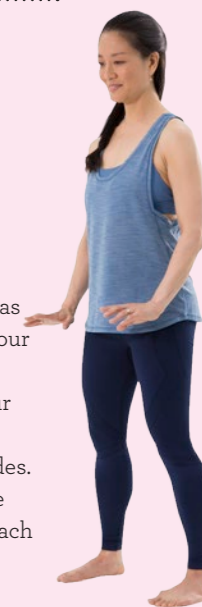


**3** Exhaling, bend your knees and push your hands from behind the ribs, palms forward.

**4** Inhaling, stand straighter and draw your arms back.



**5** Exhale as you step your foot back, letting your hands rest by your sides. Repeat five times on each side. □



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