HEALTH BASICS

Chi gong

Chi gong is a Chinese mind-body practice combining movement, breathing, and focused attention.

WHAT IT IS
A Chinese mind-body practice using movement, breathing, and focused attention

WHERE IT COMES UP
Wellness classes, rehabilitation, exercise programs, and complementary health care

WHY IT MATTERS
May support gentle activity, balance, relaxation, and wellbeing

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or replacement for medical care

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, physical therapist, or qualified instructor

HOW IT IS CHECKED
None; it is a practice, not a measurable condition

Overview

Chi gong, more commonly written as qigong , is a traditional Chinese mind-body practice. The name is pronounced roughly "chee-gong." It combines controlled movement or still postures with breathing and focused attention.

There are many forms of qigong. Some involve slow, flowing movements while standing. Others are done sitting, lying down, or holding one posture. Practices may be taught for general exercise, relaxation, cultural or spiritual reasons, or as a complementary approach to health.

In traditional Chinese thought, qi refers to a form of vital energy, and gong refers to skill developed through practice. Qi is part of the practice's traditional explanation. Medical science has not established it as a biological force that can be measured with a clinical test.

Qigong is not a disease or diagnosis. It is also not a single standardized treatment. Classes, instructors, movements, intensity, and goals can differ greatly.

How it works

A typical session may include slow arm and body movements, upright or seated postures, relaxed breathing, and attention to physical sensations. Some forms also use visualization, repeated phrases, or meditation.

These activities may affect health in ordinary, measurable ways. Gentle movement can exercise muscles and joints. Shifting weight may challenge balance. Slow breathing and focused attention may reduce short-term stress or help you feel calmer.

Researchers have studied whether qigong affects pain, balance, mood, sleep, fatigue, physical function, and quality of life. Results sometimes suggest benefit, but studies do not always use the same form of qigong. Many have been small or have had design limits.

It is also difficult to separate the effects of qigong from attention, social contact, expectation, and physical activity. Participants know whether they are practising, so studies cannot fully "blind" them to the intervention.

There is no medical test for whether qigong is working. Any effect is judged by the goal that matters to you, such as easier movement, better balance, less distress, or improved daily function.

Why it matters for your health

Qigong can provide a gentle way to move, particularly when a class is adapted to your ability. It may appeal to people who prefer slower exercise or a practice that includes both movement and relaxation.

Research reviews have found possible benefits for some health outcomes. However, the strength of evidence differs by condition, and a positive result does not mean qigong treats the underlying cause. It should usually be viewed as a possible addition to appropriate care, not a substitute for it.

The amount of physical activity in qigong also differs. A quiet seated session may provide little aerobic exercise, while a more active form may involve prolonged standing and repeated weight shifting. If your goal is to meet general physical activity recommendations, ask how qigong fits alongside walking, strengthening, balance work, or other activities.

Some classes use the term external qigong . This means a practitioner claims to direct qi toward another person, sometimes without touching them. Reliable evidence has not established external qi as a medical treatment. Be cautious if someone says it can diagnose illness, replace tests, or cure a health condition.

What can go wrong

Qigong is generally considered a low-impact activity, but low impact does not mean risk-free. The relevant problems are usually related to movement, balance, breathing, or inappropriate health claims.

Possible situations include:

Stop the session and arrange routine advice if movements repeatedly cause pain, dizziness, unusual breathlessness, or loss of balance. A primary care clinician or physical therapist can help identify safer positions or suitable alternatives.

Seek urgent medical care for a serious injury, a new inability to bear weight, or symptoms that remain severe after stopping.

Call emergency services for chest pressure, severe difficulty breathing, fainting, sudden one-sided weakness, or trouble speaking. These are not expected effects of qigong and may signal a medical emergency.

- Muscle or joint strain , especially from unfamiliar positions or repeated movements
- Falls , particularly during standing exercises or weight shifting
- Dizziness or light-headedness , including from standing up quickly or changing normal breathing
- Worsening pain , if a movement is unsuitable for an injury or joint condition
- Delayed medical care , if qigong is used instead of assessment or treatment
- Financial harm , when costly sessions are sold using unsupported promises

What you can do

First decide what you want from the practice. Your goal might be gentle activity, relaxation, improved confidence with movement, or time in a group setting. A clear goal makes it easier to judge whether the class is useful.

Before joining, ask the instructor:

Instructor qualifications are not standardized everywhere. A certificate may show that someone completed a course, but it does not make them a medical professional. An instructor should stay within their training and should not tell you to stop prescribed care.

Ask a clinician or physical therapist about adaptations before starting if you have frequent falls, severe osteoporosis, a recent operation or injury, unstable heart or lung symptoms, or major limits on standing and walking. If you are pregnant, ask whether particular postures or balance

movements are suitable for you.

Wear stable footwear if the class uses shoes, and use a chair or wall for support when needed. Do not force a posture, hold your breath, or continue through sharp pain. Seated qigong may be an option if standing is unsafe or tiring.

There is no laboratory test or scan needed for qigong. If you are using it for a health-related goal, keep a simple record of what you did and whether it changed your function, pain, sleep, mood, or balance. Share persistent or concerning changes with the clinician involved in your care.

- What style is being taught and how physically demanding it is
- Whether movements can be done seated or with support
- What training and experience the instructor has
- How the class handles pain, dizziness, falls, or other health concerns
- Whether the instructor makes claims about treating or curing illness

Common questions

Is qigong the same as tai chi?

They overlap but are not identical. Tai chi developed as a martial art and is often taught as a set sequence of movements. Qigong is a broader group of breathing, movement, posture, and meditation practices. Some exercises may be described using either term.

Can qigong treat a medical condition?

Research has explored qigong for several conditions, but evidence is mixed and often limited. It should not replace diagnosis, prescribed medicines, rehabilitation, or other recommended care. If you want to use it alongside treatment, discuss the specific goal with the clinician managing that care.

Do I need to believe in qi?

No. Some people approach qigong through its traditional or spiritual framework. Others use it as gentle movement, breathing practice, or meditation. You can ask an instructor how traditional concepts are presented before joining.

How often should I practise?

There is no universal medical dose for qigong. Research programs use different session lengths and schedules. Start at a level that matches your ability, follow safe instruction, and judge the practice against your own goal.

Can I learn from an online video?

A video may make the practice accessible, but it cannot check your balance, posture, or response to movement. Choose beginner material from a credible organization, keep support nearby if needed, and stop if you feel unwell. In-person guidance may be safer if you have mobility or balance difficulties.

Is seated qigong still qigong?

Yes. Many practices can be adapted for sitting, limited arm movement, or shorter sessions. The appropriate version is the one you can do safely and comfortably.

Sources

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