

## Implementing Tai Chi for Fibromyalgia

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### Abstract

Chronic pain conditions, including fibromyalgia (FM), are often exacerbated by psychological and social factors. Clinicians regularly manage FM with analgesic medications; however, this frequently fails to be successful. Meditative movements, such as Tai Chi, could be an intervention that improves pain management in patients with FM. An ever-growing body of research suggests that Tai Chi exerts significant positive effects on improving pain management, whilst also improving quality of life. The implementation of Tai Chi, nonetheless, provides a challenge. Furthermore, research fails to consider home based practice, compared to supervised classes. Overall, Tai Chi could empower patients to adopt lifestyle changes which improves pain management and symptom control. Access to mindfulness based exercise requires further consideration and implementation.

**Keywords:** Fibromyalgia; Chronic pain; Tai Chi

### Introduction

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a chronic pain condition, affecting up to 2-8% of the population [1]. Alongside chronic pain, patients can experience sleep disturbances, fatigue and memory problems. Clinicians often use pharmacotherapy to manage patients with FM, unfortunately this is frequently insufficient [2]. Meditative movements such as Tai Chi could help with the management of FM. Research indicates that Tai Chi can improve pain management in FM, significantly more than aerobic exercise and standard care [3]. Furthermore, longer durations (>24 weeks) of practising Tai Chi exerts better outcomes, with cumulative pain relief [4]. Therefore, it seems Tai Chi is a lifestyle intervention that should be promoted for patients with FM.

### Home-Based Practice

Whilst research provides positive insight into the management of FM, some areas of knowledge remain to be investigated. There is limited research into supervised Tai Chi interventions compared to self-care practice.

Although home based mindfulness practice been investigated, research has yet to explore home based practice of Tai Chi compared supervised classes. This is important consideration, ability to practice Tai Chi at home could increase uptake and accessibility to patients [5]. Furthermore, Tai Chi is a low impact exercise with minimal side effects.

Meditative movements could provide multiple health benefits, which adds to its desirability as an intervention for both patients and clinicians [6].

### Implementing Tai Chi

Implementing Tai Chi could be challenging, in which my prior research highlights. Research fails to consider how to implement Tai Chi within the community. There is insufficient funding within the National Health Service (NHS), especially given the current COVID-19 pandemic [7].

In light of this, I created an information resource to be distributed in general practices and pain clinics. (Figure 1) seems the challenge is not quantifying results but transforming the research into an accessible intervention for patients.

The educational resource outlines ways to access Tai Chi online, and how to search for classes. Further modes to increase access to Tai Chi could involve social prescribing. However, the next step forward would be to distribute the resource *via* general practices and quantify the outcome using a survey.

If the results indicate a positive outcome, the project could be expanded, whilst further educating patients and clinicians on Tai Chi.

## Tai Chi for fibromyalgia



### Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a chronic pain syndrome defined by widespread body pain, lasting over three months. Fibromyalgia can negatively impact everyday life. Medications are often used in initial management; however this is mostly unsuccessful.

### Tai Chi

Tai Chi originates from martial arts. Tai Chi combines deep breathing and a series of gentle postures to foster a healthy relationship of body and mind. Patients with fibromyalgia may feel physical, psychological and social stress which can worsen pain. Tai chi aims to target these negative emotions and challenges to help control symptoms.



### Tai Chi for pain management in fibromyalgia

Research indicates that Tai Chi can improve symptoms, including pain, in patients with fibromyalgia. (1-2) Tai Chi has positive effects and improves quality of life by empowering patients to create behaviours which improve pain management.



### Access to Tai chi

You can practice Tai Chi by attending classes, or by following online guidance at home. Tai Chi can be flexible and completed for short periods of time at home. You can practice Tai Chi whilst sitting or standing. Search for video links online to learn more about Tai Chi.

- Classes can be found locally using the website: **The tai chi Union for Great Britain.**

- Ask your GP to refer you to a **social prescriber link worker**, who may be able to signpost you to tai chi classes & fibromyalgia support groups

- Online resources can be found on the following webpage: [www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/improving-health-and-fitness/tai-chi](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/improving-health-and-fitness/tai-chi)

- Read about body reprogramming at <http://www.bodyreprogramming.org>

Tai Chi

with FM. However, more research is needed into home based practice compared to supervised intervention. Implementing Tai Chi remains a challenge. Firstly, an educational resource could improve access to Tai Chi. If the outcomes are quantified, an added step would be to increase access of Tai Chi *via* social prescribing. Such an intervention could have multiple health benefits, and thus is desirable to patients and clinicians.

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Figure 1: Tai Chi for Fibromyalgia.

## Conclusion

Overall, my research highlights the multiple health benefits of Tai Chi as a method of improving pain management in patients