

Tai Chi Warm-up and Stretching Guide

These exercises are based on Dr. Paul Lam's warm-up and stretching routine, which is used to prepare for Tai Chi practice. (<https://taichiforhealthinstitute.org/warm-up-and-stretching-exercises/>)

General Guidelines:

Attire: Wear loose, comfortable clothing and flat, well-fitting shoes.

Safety: Stop any movement that causes pain or discomfort.

Execution: Perform all movements slowly, continuously, and smoothly.

Comfort: Begin each exercise at 70% of your full range of motion, gradually increasing as you become more comfortable.

Balance: Exercise both sides of your body when possible.

Disclaimer

This guide is for general well-being and gentle movement. Please listen to your body and go at your own pace. If you have any health concerns, check with your doctor before starting. Participation is at your own risk - move mindfully and enjoy!

Step One: Warm-Up

Choose one or more of the following activities:

Gentle Movement (1-2 minutes): Walk around, gently shake your hands and legs, and clench and unclench your fists to loosen your body and joints.

Self-Massage: Rub your hands together to generate warmth (increase qi), then massage your legs, ankles, feet, lower back, and shoulders, re-warming your hands as needed.

Light Activity: Take a short walk or a hot shower.

Step Two: Stretching

Repetition: Perform each stretch 3 to 5 times, alternating sides if desired.

Support: Use a chair or wall for balance if needed.

Progressive Stretching: Begin each stretch at 70% of your normal range of motion, gradually increasing. Always stay within your comfortable range of movement.

Stretching Routine:

- Focus on six key areas (neck, shoulders, spine, hips, knees, and ankles), performing two targeted exercises for each.
- Work from head to toe (neck to ankles).
- Keep your feet shoulder-width apart during stretches unless otherwise instructed.

Stretching Exercises

Basic Stands

Stand with your feet hip-width apart, as if positioned on parallel railway tracks.

Soften your knees and hips to release tension from the lower body.

Visualise your head being gently pulled upwards toward the sky, while the base of your spine is drawn downward - encouraging a naturally lengthened and aligned spine.

Relax your shoulders. Let your arms hang loosely at your sides with palms facing each other. Keep the arms slightly abducted, as if carrying light shopping bags. Soften your elbows and gently engage your fingers with light tension.

Tuck your chin slightly back - level with your chest - to encourage length through the back of the neck and proper cervical alignment.

Visualise your spine as straight, gently elongated, and relaxed.

Focus on calm, steady breathing - inhale and exhale through the nose - directing the breath deeply into the lower abdominal area (Lower Dantian).

1. Neck Movements

Head Flexion/Extension

Start in the basic stance with palms facing backward. Inhale and slowly raise your arms by the wrists - as if lifted by balloons - until they reach shoulder height.

Turn your palms to face your face and gently bring your hands towards your chin, lightly pushing the chin back. As you exhale, extend your arms forward and lower them slowly while gently lowering your head towards your chest.

Head Rotations

Raise your left hand to eye level, palm facing your face. Right hand remains by your hip, palm facing down. Gaze at your middle finger as you rotate your head and left hand to the left (approximately 70% of your range of motion).

Gradually increase the range with each repetition. Return hand and head to centre. Switch hands and repeat to the right.

2. Shoulder Movements

Shoulder Roll

Roll your shoulders forward in a gentle, controlled motion. Keep your arms relaxed, elbows soft, and palms facing each other.

Repeat the movement rolling your shoulders backwards.

Gathering Qi

Inhale as you extend your arms sideways with palms facing upward. Curve your arms overhead in a smooth arc.

Exhale and gently press your hands down in front of your body. Once your hands pass your chest, rotate palms to face upward.

3. Spine Movements

Spine Stretch

Form a “ball” with your hands in front of your abdomen - left hand on top, right on bottom.

Push the lower hand upward toward the sky (or forward) while the top hand presses downward beside your body.

Return to the ball position and switch hands with each repetition.

Spine Turn

Soften your knees. Hold the imaginary ball in front of your lower abdomen (Dantian), left hand on top, right hand below.

Gently rotate your upper body and shoulders to the left, moving hands to align over your left knee (approx. 45° rotation).

Switch hand positions and rotate to the right.

4. Hip Movements

Forward Stretch

Shift all your weight onto the right foot. Step the left foot forward about half a step, resting the heel with toes pointing up.

Stretch your arms backward with palms facing down.

Then step the right foot back onto the toes while moving arms forward, allowing a gentle forward stretch.

Alternate sides.

Side Stretch

Hold your hands in front of your chest, palms facing each other.

Step sideways to the left (half step). Push both hands to the right, as if pressing against an invisible wall, while stretching your left foot outward.

Return both foot and hands to centre. Repeat on the other side and alternate.

5. Knee Movements

Pretended Kick

With relaxed fists at your hips, lift the left foot and lightly tap the toes on the ground, without applying any weight.

Simultaneously, punch forward gently with the opposite (right) fist.

Maintain body weight on the standing leg. Alternate sides.

Step Forward

Take a small step forward with the left foot - heel first, then the ball of the foot.

Once stable, shift weight forward and spiral-punch with the opposite (right) fist.

Return the foot, secure it in place, and shift your weight back to the basic stance. Switch sides and repeat.

6. Ankle Movements

Tapping Ankle

Shift your weight fully to one foot.

Lift the opposite foot and alternately tap the heel and toes on the ground. Repeat 3–5 times. Switch sides.

Eversion/Inversion

Shift your weight onto one leg.

With the other foot, alternately tap the outer (eversion) and inner (inversion) edges of the foot. Keep the active foot unweighted. Alternate sides.

Closing Movement

Finish with three repetitions of the Qi Gathering movement:

Inhale as you extend both arms sideways, palms facing up, and gently curve them overhead.

Exhale while pressing your hands down in front of your body. Once they pass your chest, rotate the palms to face upward.

Repeat two more times to conclude the session.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

— Aristotle