

Tai Chi Warm Up and Stretching Exercises

Slightly adapted from Dr Paul Lam by Geoff Ward.

This set of exercises is adapted from the Six Easy Step Tai Chi for Beginners program. They are stretching exercises containing Tai Chi elements. Practising them regularly will enhance your flexibility and tune up your muscles as well as preparing you for some Tai Chi movements.

Before You Start

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing and flat, well-fitting shoes.
- Don't continue doing any movement that is painful or causes you discomfort.
- Do all movements slowly, continuously and smoothly. Don't rush to get through the warm ups. Think of them as part of your Tai Chi practice, not something separate.
- Move only within your comfort range. The first time you do a movement, stretch to only 70 per cent of your normal range and increase that range gradually.
- When appropriate do both sides.
- Seek to make all the movements with both physical and mental control. If you cannot move as fully as you want to, do the movement through a shorter distance and visualise yourself moving further. You may well find that this helps you to extend the movements over time.

Step One - Warm Up Exercises

- For a minute or so, walk around, gently shaking your hands and legs, and clenching and unclenching your hands. This loosens your body and joints in preparation for the exercises that follow. Alternatively, take a short walk or a warm shower.

Step Two - Stretching Exercises

- Do each stretch 3-5 times. Three of each is usual. It doesn't matter which side you do first, though in class the movements will be done consistently with one side first.
- If you have any difficulty balancing, use a chair or the wall for support. Remember, in each session, to stretch to only 70 per cent of your normal range and gradually increase that range.
- We gently stretch six parts of the body- neck, shoulders, spine, hips, knees and ankles – with two exercises for each body part. It might help you to remember them by knowing we are working from the top down, starting with the neck, and ending at the ankles.

Unless otherwise specified, keep your feet shoulder-width apart.

Neck

1) Head Back

As you inhale, bring both hands up slowly, imagining your wrists are being lifted by two balloons.

Turn your palms so that your fingers are pointing upward. Bring them toward your chin; pull your chin backward gently. Do not tilt the head back.

Head Down

Exhaling, push both hands outward, extending them in front of you, and then press your hands down slowly and gently. At the same time, slowly bring your head down toward your chest following the movement of your hands with your eyes.

2) Turning Head

Bring your two hands up and then keep only the left hand up and look at your palm or just over the top of your fingers. Your right hand should be lowered again down near your hip, palm facing the ground.

Move your left hand to the left, turning only your head to the left and keeping your eyes on your palm. Now turn your neck back to face front. Change palms so that your right palm is now facing you and the left is down near the left hip. Turn to the right while looking at the right palm or over the fingers.

Shoulders

1) Shoulder Roll

Roll shoulders gently forward and then backward. Large rolls add flexibility to the shoulder joints, but smaller ones develop the important deep muscles in the upper back better, so vary the way you do this stretch from time to time.

2) Gathering Qi

Inhaling, extend both arms to the side, elbows slightly lower than your hands. With palms starting facing up, move your arms up in a curve to your eye level, so your palms will be facing down.

As you exhale, gently press your hands down in front of your body to just below your navel.

Spine

1) Stretch Spine

Hands in front, as though you're carrying a volleyball. Inhale.

Exhaling, push one hand up as though your palm is pushing against the ceiling, fingertips facing inward. At the same time, push the other hand down by your side. Do not straighten either arm, but focus on the stretch in your back without leaning from side to side. Then change hands. If it is hard to stretch upwards, stretch more forwards and less upwards.

2) Spine Turn

Hands in front, as though you're carrying a volleyball. Left hand is on top.

With knees slightly bent, turn your waist gently to the left. Then change hands, putting the right hand on top and turn to the right. Keep your back upright and supple. The "ball" should stay in front of you, though it will look as if you are moving it from side to side as you turn.

Hip

1) Forward Stretch

Place your left heel out in front of you as though taking a step, but without moving your weight forward. At the same time, push both hands down by your sides as though you were about to sit on a bench to help balance.

Step backward with your left foot resting on the toes, and stretch your hands forward to about shoulder height.

Repeat on the other side.

An easier alternative is to pause your step with your toes near the right foot before stepping backward.

2) Side Stretch

Push your hands to the side as though you're pushing against a wall; both palms face outwards with the lower hand by the upper elbow. At the same time, stretch the opposite foot sideways and lightly touch down. Focus on the foot bearing the weight while you make an empty step with the other foot.

Knees

1) Kick (or Toe Touch in the early stages particularly)

Make loose fists, palm side up, resting at the sides of the hips.

Stretch out one foot like a kicking motion but slowly and gently. (Technically, this is from a 'rooster position' so if you do this fully, you raise the knee first and then kick gently forward.) At the same time, spiral punch out gently with the opposite fist, turning it palm down. You can leave the other fist lightly by your side or draw it back a little to increase the stretch. Bring your arm and leg back in and repeat on the other side.

2) Step Forward

With fists next to hips as above, bend your knees slightly and step forward with one foot. Touch with the heel and then flatten the foot.

Shift your weight on to the front leg, and as your body moves forward, punch out with opposite fist. Keep the back foot flat to increase the stretch. Bring your foot back and do the other side. Peel the foot up from the toes first, keeping the heel down as you bring your weight back to extend the stretch in the calf and thigh before you lift the foot back.

Ankles

1) Tapping - ankle endwise

Tap foot down with heel touching lightly.

Tap foot down with toes touching lightly.

2) Tapping - ankle sideways

Tap the outside edge of the foot down, then the inside edge of the foot to stretch the ankle gently. Do this three times and repeat with the other foot.

Finish

You may like to finish by repeating the Gathering Qi movements.