

By Dr. Barbara Briner

Recent studies exploring the effects of Qigong on the human body have shown that it can strengthen the immune system. Qigong with its origins in pre-history is one of the oldest branches of Traditional Chinese Medicine. It is said to have been developed by the early Daoists as they sought ways to enhance health by increasing the natural harmony of the body.

Today in China, in the early mornings before the sun rises and heats up the streets, millions of people practice this moving meditation. Daily on balconies, parking lots, riversides, basically wherever there is a couple square feet space, you can find groups of people making these slow and fluid movements as the world comes to life around them. Qigong is now growing in popularity in Europe and the United States as well. Contemporary research has finally found a way to begin to unravel the puzzle of what Qigong is *doi*
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in the body to create the health benefits it does. For example, A recent pilot study conducted by B. Jones in the Division of Clinical Immunology at Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong suggests that the “stress-related hormone cortisol may be lowered by short-term practice of Qigong.” Jones and his colleagues found that the immune system of the practitioners was boosted when they practiced Qigong. Cellular type 1 cytokine production was especially enhanced, an exciting discovery since it plays a considerable role in viral, parasite and fungal infections as well as deadly diseases such as Tuberculosis or AIDS.

To make this discovery they had 17 healthy Chinese men and women, aged 27-55 years of age, practice Qigong daily. To begin, the subjects were given a two hour lesson in Qigong. They were asked to practice Qigong individually, on a daily basis, for 14 weeks. The subjects were examined at set intervals: before, during, and after completion of the 14 weeks. Their blood pressure and pulse rate were taken and their blood was tested for cortisol levels, interleukin production (IFN γ , IL4, IL6, IL10, IL12) as well as the Tumor Necrosis Factor TNF α . The findings were impressive. While no changes in blood pressure was found, it was discovered that cortisol

levels dropped in the test groups. They also found TNF α levels increased and dropped again in the individuals who stopped after 10 weeks while staying elevated in the group who continued to practice. In addition, the ratio IFN γ :IL10:SC in PHA stimulated cultures was significantly higher compared to before training began. From these results they surmised that regular qigong practice improved the body's ability to cope with stress, producing lowered cortisol and an increase in type 1 cytokine production. The subjects had significantly increased IFN γ and reduced IL10-SC after practicing Qigong for as little as 3 weeks, with even greater increases at 14 weeks. This effect was still seen at 14 weeks in subjects who quit the program early, stopping the exercise at 10 weeks. [1]

What do these markers mean to us and what do they say about the body's ability to fight disease? The IFN γ :IL10 ratio can be used as a clinical marker of disease severity for tuberculosis (a highly contagious, often devastating, lung disease). Being able to adjust the ratio speaks to enhancing our body's ability to fight the disease. [2] The cellular immunity, or cytokine type 1 response, is foundational to our immune health and is also greatly involved in the auto-immune disease known as AIDS.

The beneficial effect of daily qigong practice on health and immune system was also shown in another recent study conducted by Dr Yang at the University of Illinois in the United States. This research team studied the effects of Taiji and Qigong on the antibody response to influenza vaccine in older adults. Taiji is another traditional slow movement exercise used to enhance health. They examined 50 adults near the age of 77 who practiced a moderate combined Taiji-Qigong form for 5 months. After receiving the 2003-2004 influenza vaccine during the first week of their practice, the anti-influenza titers were measured at set intervals throughout the study. It was found that the practicing group showed a significantly higher antibody response to the influenza vaccine than the non practicing control group. This suggests a stronger, faster immune response in the Taiji-Qigong group. [3] Considering that influenza is a major cause for death in elderly, this result is of great interest. These studies add weight to the argument that a daily Qigong and/or Taiji practice is good for our health. The immune boosting qualities these practices have on our bodies can be a powerful tool in both preventative health care and quite possibly in the treatment of many diseases. Encouraging the daily practice of some type of Qigong seems to be an effective and low cost approach to strengthening the body's ability to maintain health.

- [1] Jones B. Changes in cytokine production in healthy subjects practicing Guolin qigong: a pilot study. *BMC Complement Altrn Med.* 2001; 1:8. Published online 2001 Oct. 18. doi: 10.1186/1472-6882-1-8.
- [2] Jamil. B, Shahid F., Hasan Z., Nasir N., Razzaki T., Dawood, G., Hussain R. Interferon?IL10 Ratio defines disease severity in pulmonary and extra pulmonary tbc. Received 26 June 2006; revised 21 March 2007; accepted 30 March 2007. [doi:10.1016/j.tube.2007.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tube.2007.03.004)
- [3] Yang Y. Effects of a Taiji and Qigong Intervention on the Antibody Response to Influenza Vaccine in Older Adults. *The American Journal of Chinese Medicine.* 2007, Vol 35, Iss: 4: PP 597-607