

Learn Tai Chi for free through SilverSneakers

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Seniors practicing Tai Chi at Friendship Village

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Healthways SeniorSneakers is a leading provider of comprehensive health solutions to help millions of seniors maintain or improve their health and, as a result, reduce overall health care costs. Developed in 1992, Healthways' SilverSneakers Fitness Program encourages Medicare-eligible individuals to participate in physical activity and addresses mental and social needs. Delivered through a nationwide network of more than 11,000 participating locations and the FLEX program, SilverSneakers is the nation's leading fitness program designed exclusively for older adults. Currently, it has more than 2 million members.

There are many programs offered by Healthways through major health clubs, i.e. YMCA, **Curves**, **SNAP Fitness**, **Gold's Gym**, and community-based health centers. The FLEX program is designed to attract seniors who typically don't visit a gym/fitness center or need more variety, ease of access, or a different customer experience. FLEX offers classes of Zumba, **Tai Chi** (Taiji), **Qigong**, yoga and walking taught by

certified instructors at local parks, recreation centers, and older-adult living communities.

It is estimated there are 11 million seniors who are eligible to join SilverSneakers. The FLEX program allows qualified instructors to establish their own classes or activities and take them outside the gym, to where the members are – it can be in senior centers, churches, parks, and other existing or new venues.

“I see myself losing weight. I feel better. When you go to the doctor and he says ‘Whoa, you’re doing good,’ instead of ‘You gotta lose weight,’ that encourages me to keep going to the gym. I don’t make excuses anymore,” stated by a SilverSneakers member. This shows the benefits of prevention over treatment; exercise is definitely more enjoyable than medication or medical treatment.

Tai Chi and Qigong, considered the perfect exercises for everyone, are suitable for seniors due to their smoothness and low impact. Tai Chi and Qigong are clinically proven to boosting the immune system and sleep quality, reducing hypertension, anxiety, stress, chronic pains, improving balance, flexibility, muscle and bone health, and delaying the onset of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. In the past few years, I have interviewed hundreds of seniors doing Tai Chi and Qigong. The health benefits are overwhelming. Lina Takacs (St. Louis, MO) said that Tai Chi brought her calmness, helping her to survive cancer. Crane Kirkridge (San Francisco, CA) stated that Qigong helped him combat Parkinson’s Disease and restore his quality of life. Dr. Elinor Greenberg’s (New York, NY) back pain was gone after Tai Chi practice. Jerry Wild (St. Louis, MO) stated that Tai Chi helped him maintain balance even though he has suffered from Parkinson’s Disease for over 30 years. Rick Fife (Jacksonville, FL) said Tai Chi practice kept him strong and independent, freeing him from his walker. Norm Seligman (St. Louis, MO) claimed Tai Chi relived his arthritis pain. The seniors at Sullivan Place (St. Louis, MO) found themselves sleeping sounder after Tai Chi practices. The stories go on and on.

Many YMCAs and health clubs offer free Tai Chi and/or Qigong classes for its members. As a SilverSneakers member, you can take those classes without any cost. If you cannot find a Tai Chi or Qigong class available in your area offered by those health clubs, it is possible that you might be able to locate one from the FLEX program.

To improve your health, you can find out your eligibility of SilverSneakers by visiting its website <http://www.silversneakers.com/benefits/which-health-plans-have-it>. The web tool is user-friendly. Or simply call your medical insurance company and find out if you are eligible. Once you become a member, you can use many SilverSneakers facilities and the FLEX program to take Tai Chi, Qigong, or other fitness/wellness classes at no cost. Senior centers, churches, and community centers can also take initiative, organize Tai Chi and Qigong classes, hire a SilverSneakers Tai Chi/Qigong instructor to teach, and have SilverSneakers pay the instructor.

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