

1

Movement Therapies

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Movement therapies refer to alternative forms of exercise utilizing movements and positions that promote neuromuscular control, rhythm and flexibility. There are a variety of movement therapies that range from the ancient martial arts to new approaches. Common types of movement therapies include yoga, tai chi, Alexander technique and Pilates.

Yoga is practiced throughout the world and is derived from the traditional Indian healing system called Ayurveda, which is one of the oldest approaches to promoting good health. The word yoga means “union” which has been interpreted as bringing together physical, mental and spiritual energies to enhance one’s well-being. The regular practice of yoga has been shown to improve posture, promote relaxation, facilitate flexibility, improve balance and help lower heart rate and blood pressure. For some individuals yoga has proven to be an effective method for reducing the intensity of low back pain. Many of the more popular yoga positions are similar or identical to positions utilized by physical therapists during the course of traditional back therapy.

Tai chi (TIE-chee) consists of controlled movements that flow rhythmically from one position into another in one graceful maneuver. Tai chi developed and matured over the course of centuries in China. It requires slow methodical, dance-like movements that help relax muscles, improve coordination of muscle activity and promote joint flexibility. The application of Tai chi may help reduce the risk for falls. The sequence of movements are often referred to by poetic names. Research has demonstrated that Tai chi promotes balance and reduces the risk for falling, therefore also reducing the risk for spinal injury. Tai chi consists of over 100 movements, although most modern-day classes may teach a more limited approach, emphasizing 10 to 40 positions. Unlike the martial arts, tai chi does not involve jerky or jarring movements, which makes it a safe form of exercise for the majority of individuals with back pain.

Pilates is a movement therapy consisting of a system of conditioning exercises that emphasize appropriate body alignment and efficient breathing techniques. It was developed in the 1920s and has recently gained popularity. Pilates is used to improve spine stability and spine health. Pilates is used to develop low back and abdominal muscles providing a core of lumbopelvic support as a basis for supporting the whole body. The Pilates approach also focuses on the use of mental focus to improve the efficiency of muscle control and to help develop deep muscles of the back. Pilates exercises can be conducted in a group or one-on-one setting.

Before implementing any movement therapy, it is important to consult your attending physician. It is also important to find an instructor that is aware of the kind of condition you may have and the goals that have been set for you.