

HEALTH

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TCM

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Monkey grip

Regular physical exercise is an important aspect of health maintenance. But, unlike some modern approaches, TCM doesn't recommend pushing the body to its limits.

Moderate and gentle exercise is considered the best way to stimulate *chi* and blood flow around the body for health protection and nourishment.

Over the centuries, many distinctive exercises have been created in China such as boxing, sword dancing, gymnastics, *qigong*, tai chi, martial arts and meditation.

One practice not well known outside China is the Five-Animal Play, a form of exercise that is still used today.

In ancient times, the Chinese believed that the long life-spans of certain animals were due to the ways they moved. Inspired by the actions of different animals, they created sets of so-called remedy dances for healing and health maintenance.

"The human body needs physical exercises, but must not exert itself to the extreme," said physician Hua Tuo

(141-208AD). "Motions that promote digestion, absorption and smooth blood circulation are just designed."

He devised movements that mimicked those of five animals: the tiger, deer, bear, monkey and bird.

To mimic the tiger, take in a deep breath and hold it while clenching the fists. Look down and repeatedly sweep the fists to the right and left. Next, stretch the body and raise the arms slowly as if lifting heavy objects. Gulp down a breath and jump back and forth, twisting the body simultaneously. This is for muscle strengthening.

For deer movements, raise the head and shake it left and right repeatedly. Turn the body in circles in alternate directions while looking down, as if chasing a tail. Next, hold the breath while clenching the fists and stretch

the body up as far as possible. Then, jump up on your tiptoes. These movements promote flexibility, especially in the tendons and joints.

To mimic a bear, sway at the waist while stepping heavily to the left and then right – like a bear walking – then stand up straight and stretch. This helps relax the upper body and promote downward blood and *chi* flow.

To mimic a monkey, hold your breath and position the body like a monkey climbing a tree. Stretch out one hand as if grasping for fruit and raise one leg. Gulp down your breath until you can't hold the position any more. This activates the limbs and joints.

For a bird, take a deep breath and hold it. Bow, then raise the head like a bird ready to fly. Clench the fists and raise the arms just above the head. Then, gently stroke from the forehead to nose before lightly tapping the crown of the head with the fingertips. These movements expand the chest and regulate circulation in meridians.

The Five-Animal Play is said to promote organ health and is suitable for those with chronic conditions and people who want to maintain health. Repeating one or two movements a couple of times a day can be a good start to achieving muscle strength and flexibility.

Each exercise requires good control of the breath. It takes practice to do the movement correctly.