

T'ai chi helps keep the over-60s steady on their feet

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T'ai chi could help to prevent falls for people aged over 60, researchers have concluded.

Scientists found "strong evidence" that exercise programmes reduced the number of falls in older people by about a quarter. Cathie Sherrington, a professor at the University of Sydney, said: "Doctors should routinely be recommending exercise to older people to reduce their risk of falls. At this stage the most effective forms of exercise safely target balance and function so

are primarily done standing up. This can involve t'ai chi or other programmes with exercises designed to help one get out of a chair — such as squats — balance while standing, change direction and climb stairs."

The study is a Cochrane review, which uses a systematic method to produce a comprehensive report on available evidence on health topics. It combined results from more than 100 trials with 23,000 participants.

The team, from Sydney University and Oxford University, said that if there were 850 falls among 1,000 older

people doing no fall-preventive exercise during a year, there would be 195 fewer falls among people who were doing the exercise. They also found that if 480 out of 1,000 people had one or more falls over a year, participating in exercise programmes would reduce the number of fallers by 72.

Worldwide there are more than 37 million falls each year that are severe enough to require medical attention. They are a leading cause of accidental or unintentional injury deaths.

The exercise programmes studied were mainly done while standing and

some used weights to make the exercise harder. The average age of participants was 76. Three quarters were women. The evidence was strongest for programmes that mainly involved balance and functional exercises. There was less certainty on the effectiveness of dance or walking on their own.

Professor Sherrington, one of the authors of the study, said that her team was about to start a trial looking at whether yoga helped to prevent falls, which has not yet been studied. There have also been no trials looking at whether running or cycling prevent falls.