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YOUR GUIDE TO LIFELONG HEALTH AND LEARNING : SEPTEMBER 2006

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BELLY DANCE

to Prepare for Childbirth

by Marci Johnson

“Belly dance is an excellent form of prenatal conditioning.”

Was I hearing correctly? Was my OB/GYN telling me that one of the most beneficial exercises I could do for my pregnancy was belly dance—an exercise done barefoot wearing shimmering silks and velvets; a fun, sensual and toning workout that inherently celebrates fertility and pregnancy? No sneakers, no scary metal equipment—sign me up!

Actually, I didn't need to be converted; hearing this from a medical professional only validated what I already knew. Having made my living as a professional Middle Eastern dancer for more than twelve years, I was familiar with the richly layered benefits of belly dance, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. I had seen many pregnant women belly dance but until I got pregnant myself, I never understood belly dance in its truest form, an ancient birth dance honoring the life-giving force of a woman's belly.

I was well aware, of course, of the origins of belly dance. Many researchers have found evidence supporting the theory that belly dance is the oldest dance form, a fertility dance done by women, with and for other women (not men), encouraging, emulating and celebrating childbirth and maternity. Middle Eastern dance scholars have gone to North Africa and the Middle East today and found belly dance to be an essential ritual component of childbirth, still intact in rural communities. Of course, it seems common sense that belly dance strengthens and tones the muscles needed for childbirth, but as I had never had a child, I didn't completely understand the connection.

After receiving the green light from my OB/GYN, I found that I wanted to tailor my dancing to focus more specifically on preparing my body for childbirth. I found a prenatal belly dance class taught by a certified nurse midwife and professional belly dancer. The teacher began by telling us the value of belly dance as a means of preparing your body for childbirth compared to running as preparation for a marathon. One wouldn't expect a sedentary woman to get up and suddenly run a marathon, so naturally a woman would need to train her muscles for what many would deem harder work than running a marathon—giving birth. Belly dance does exactly that. It trains the birth muscles. We were

shown lateral hip circles, figure eights, undulations, heart circles and shimmies. Hip circles tone the abdominal wall and strengthen the back. Figure eights strengthen the hips and thighs and can be done slowly or rapidly. Changing the tempos and levels of the movements trains the muscles to isolate, very helpful in childbirth so the mother can relax the muscles that are not working and gain mastery over her body. Body waves, undulations or “camels” were also recommended. Heart/chest circles and lifts are great for the frequent indigestion problems many women experience during pregnancy as a result of crowded body organs. Shoulder shimmies done slowly and loosely were recommended as a way to relax the upper body and even to help milk come down. Shoulder and hip shimmies were considered great for relaxing the entire body and were recommended during labor.

Overall, I learned more in this workshop about my body and giving birth than I had learned in all the books I had read about pregnancy over several months. Practical tips to make labor and delivery less painful were immensely valuable. As I talked to other belly dancers and heard their stories, I felt so honored to be part of a sacred female tradition that reveres maternity and motherhood, danced by females, taught by females and handed down from the dawn of time by females.

As far as advice for beginning expectant belly dancers, this teacher said there are no moves you really shouldn't do. As with any exercise, check with your midwife or doctor before beginning, make sure your dance instructor is well informed about both belly dance and its connection to birth, and listen to your body. If anything feels like a strain, stop or slow down. Remember that your body is striving to be in the best shape possible for the coming birth so now is the opportune time to learn to belly dance.



PRENATAL BELLY DANCE MOVES TO PREPARE FOR CHILDBIRTH

BASIC BELLY DANCE STANCE: Stand with your feet hip-width apart, knees slightly bent, bottom tucked under and stomach muscles pulled in. Shoulders are relaxed and neck is long. This stance is the foundation of many belly dance moves and is a great way to stand during pregnancy, relieving pressure from the lower back.

BASIC BACK FIGURE EIGHT: Stand in Basic Stance and push the right hip toward the front corner of the room, holding the upper body still, facing front. Slowly swing the right hip in a curve to the back corner of the room and push the left hip to the front left corner of the room, making a diagonal straight line with the hips. Repeat on left side by slowly swinging the left hip to the back left corner, then pushing the right hip diagonally to the front right corner. Bend your knees deeply and experiment with different tempos. I have found making the movement slow and loose feels best on my pregnant body. Besides feeling great, this move will strengthen your thigh and hip muscles, teach you mastery of your body through isolations, and will stretch the hip flexors. Make sure your bottom stays tucked under and your stomach muscles stay strong to protect the lower back.

FULL MOON/LATERAL HIP CIRCLES: Stand in Basic Stance and, keeping your bottom tucked and your stomach tight; put your weight on your right foot. Leading with the left hip, gently swing your hips in an arc towards the left wall, switching weight to left foot, and swing them back to right. It is as if you are using your hips to outline the full moon in the air. What differentiates this move from a basic hip circle is the hips stay on a lateral plane—they don't tilt up or down. The shifting weight allows this. You can also outline the crescent moon by doing the same move, but stopping as your weight shifts from foot to

foot. You can swing across the front or the back of the circle. Remember to hold your upper body still and keep your knees bent. This move feels wonderful, strengthens and stretches the thighs and hips, and teaches you isolations.

SHOULDER SHIMMIES: Stand in Basic Stance. Hold arms out to sides, strong and relaxed. Keep a vibrant energy moving through your hands and out your fingertips so your hands don't flop. Isolate shoulders and practice moving one forward, then the other. Move shoulders at different tempos, getting faster and more relaxed until they are gently shimmying. Don't worry if it doesn't come right away. With practice, it will! This move will strengthen the upper back, arms, and shoulders, will teach you to relax while staying strong (imperative for labor!), and can even help your milk come down.

ECSTASY SHIMMIES: Stand in Basic Stance. Relax entire body and gently bounce your weight on your heels in a rhythm that feels comfortable for you. Move faster and faster, staying relaxed. Tighten your bottom and let your hips shake too. Keep it gentle! This move strengthens the entire lower body while relaxing the pelvic floor and everything else. This is another great move to teach strength in relaxation. Let yourself feel the ecstasy! ♦

Marci Johnson graduated with top honors from the creative writing program at UCLA and from Harvard School of Education. She has taught and performed in Egypt, Africa, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Mexico and Panama. She has danced with many top performers, most recently with Paul McCartney and Placido Domingo.

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