

The Health Benefits of Belly Dancing

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* Raks Sharki, also called belly dance, is a form of dance that many are familiar with. But few understand the effects it has on the human body. The graceful hip drops, rolls, and pivots of this dance form utilize muscle groups in the abdomen, pelvis, trunk, spine, and neck, working with the body instead of against it. Unlike ballet, which can potentially alter and deform the skeleton, or other dance forms that work against rather than with the body's physical inclinations, raks sharki is based on movements that come naturally to the female form. There is a wealth of health benefits awaiting those who practice this form of dance.

* Improved posture and muscle toning

Our spinal column contains more bones and ligaments than any other part of the body. Its 33 vertebrae are stacked together in a column joined together by cartilage and ligaments, and almost every movement of the torso depends upon its flexibility and function. Muscle groups that attach to the ligaments and vertebrae create movement in the trunk and pelvis areas. Raks sharki tones these muscles and maintains flexibility in a safe and effective manner.

During the dance, the movements of hip drops, circles, figure eights, and shimmies put the joints and ligaments in the lower back and hip through a full range of gentle, repetitive motion. This movement helps increase the flow of synovial fluid (nature's lubricant) in these joints. When movements are done properly, the pelvis is tipped forward, or tucked somewhat; a neutral position that can help prevent lower back problems. Raks sharki can help relieve stress to the back, counteracting the almost constant compression of the disks that occurs from sitting and a sedentary lifestyle.

These toned muscles improve posture and help prevent back pain that can be caused by the unnatural curving forward of the spine that occurs when muscle groups are weak (lordosis). Small muscle groups deep in the back that are normally under-exercised are used and strengthened. The muscles surrounding the hip, the largest joint in the body, are used and exercised during hip drops, and figure eights, enhancing flexibility and suppleness. Improved hip flexibility can lead to improved balance when walking as well.

Arms and Shoulders are exercised when doing lifts, circles, or the rippling motions of snake arms, toning muscle. This toning effect is often evident early on, since holding the arms aloft are an important element of the dance, even for beginners.

Because a woman is on her feet, moving during the dance, it is considered a weight-bearing exercise. Weight-bearing exercise can prevent osteoporosis and strengthen bones, and the overall toning can lead to an improved self-image, as the dancer becomes more balanced and poised. Raks sharki is considered a low-impact exercise, meaning the risk of injury is minimal when movements are done correctly. The benefits of belly dance can be enjoyed by women of all ages; men and children are participating in the dance as well, and reaping the same benefits.

* Weight loss

According to Dr. Carolle Jean-Murat, M.D., raks sharki can burn up to 300 calories per hour. This estimate will vary, of course, depending on the intensity of your dancing. Combined with a healthy diet that involves sensible eating, raks sharki can without a doubt be part of a sound weight loss program.

Many dance classes take place only once or twice a week. For even better results and enhanced cardiovascular benefits, try combining the flexibility and muscle strengthening of raks sharki with an aerobic routine, such as swimming or bike riding, on the days you don't have class. Your entire body will feel the benefits as the aerobic exercise works large muscle groups, and the dance enhances

strength and coordination of small muscle groups in the trunk, hips, and arms. Also, many exercise physiologists recommend doing just such a routine: alternating one form of exercise with another, for maximum benefits.

* Preparation for childbirth

The movements of raks sharki make an excellent prenatal exercise regimen that strengthens the muscles used during the childbirth process. The toned abdominal muscles and natural hip tucks, which are similar to the "pelvic rocking" taught during prenatal classes, teach the expectant mother how to move her pelvis. For women who desire natural childbirth, this form of exercise through dance, with its emphasis on muscle control not only facilitates natural childbirth, but also makes an excellent post-natal exercise that helps encourage abdominal tone. During those first weeks after giving birth, when caution is needed while healing from the birth process, these movements work the muscles gently and effectively, if done very gradually.

* Stress reduction

In this day and age of almost continuous stress, the subtle rhythms of raks sharki and the traditional movements are calming. The repetitive movements of the dance and the concentration needed to do them can help a mind filled with daily stress to "let go" for a while and relax. It's hard to worry about deadlines at work when you are thinking about getting that next drop just right, or while making sure that you are in time with the music.

One effect of stress is that our bodies tense up, causing contractions or spasms in muscle groups, such as those in the neck, shoulders, or back. When a muscle is contracted, lactic acid builds up, causing the "soreness" or pain that occurs. Blood flow to the affected muscles decreases as well.

Raks sharki, on the other hand, gently stretches and uses these vulnerable muscle groups, and as they are utilized, blood flow increases and lactic acid is flushed away. Stressed muscles relax as they are gently exercised, relieving the "clenched" muscles often seen in our society. The body becomes supple and limber, and practitioners frequently report that pain diminishes in the back and neck areas.

Raks sharki is a fun, healthy way to exercise. It can be a creative outlet that conditions, tones, and allows a woman to tune into the natural movements of her body. It can refresh, relax, and/or exhilarate. So why wait?

Advisory: Many doctors have suggested belly dancing classes as part of rehabilitation from injury; it is, however, important to check with your own medical provider before starting any new form of exercise, especially if you are over 40, pregnant or have medical problems. Most injuries related to "overdoing" for the beginner can be avoided by warming the muscles first and by remembering to do some basic stretching afterward. Listen to your body's signals. Raks sharki, or belly dance, is a wonderful and gentle way to begin to condition your body.