

LONG ISLAND JOURNAL; Health and Fun, the Belly Dancir

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WAITING for a bone density test at Manhasset Diagnostic Imaging, Jeanne Chu, 53, picked up a brochure listing classes at Pathways Women's Health, a wellness center associated with the radiological practice on the next floor. Along with osteo yoga, stretching classes and prenatal fitness, the center offered belly dancing. "The doctor told to me to exercise and relax," said Ms. Chu, who has stress-induced hypertension. "Dancing is a good form of relaxation."

Shimmying her hips and twirling in circles, Ms. Chu figured, would be a good way to start. She signed up for the lessons. "It's great exercise," Ms. Chu said recently, grasping a tambourine with streamers to shake as she wiggled her hips. "It makes you feel very good and makes you feel good as a woman."

Belly dancing is a tradition that has been passed from woman to woman for more than 3,000 years, said Renate Wallasch, 50, the dance instructor, noting that its roots are both in India and the Middle East. "It's kept a woman strong in body mind and spirit," she said. "It's beautiful, sensual and exotic. Women through all the ages have been interested in keeping this tradition alive."

Ms. Wallasch teaches women to coil their arms like an Egyptian princess, roll their shoulders and move their torsos in undulating waves to an exotic beat. She offers 16 belly dancing classes a week at the Harem Belly Dance Studio, her home studio in Baldwin. A year and half ago, she added four classes at Pathway's Manhasset location, a multidisciplinary medical center geared toward women and teenagers that offers health seminars and exercise classes. A series of six one-hour dance classes runs \$75.

Interest in belly dancing, particularly among women of a certain age, is booming. While learning the tummy flutter may just be a newly discovered old way to gain body tone, flexibility and endurance, gyms are adding belly dancing classes to their rosters, alongside cardio kickboxing and step aerobics. Ms. Wallasch's school is believed to be one of two on the Island; the other is Sasha's Studio of Belly Dancing, with classes in Centerreach and East Setauket.

"It's preventative care," Ms. Wallasch said. "I always have orthopedic surgeons sending me their patients to strengthen their pelvic wall, strengthen the back. Women tend to increase their flexibility, their agility, their endurance. This is a good place to do that. The movement is very gentle. We're not lifting. There is no jarring of the joints."