

YOUR PREGNANCY and TAI CHI

One of the delights of pregnancy is being able to relax and appreciate your changing body. Tai Chi is a form of ‘relaxing exercise’ – great to do at any time but especially when you are pregnant.

Exercise is one of the most effective ways to deal with stress, especially during pregnancy. But finding a safe type of exercise that you enjoy can be a problem. Walking and swimming are always popular, but if you'd like to try something different, a gentle form of martial arts called Tai Chi might just be what you're looking for.

In many ways, pregnancy is a pathological state, a deviation from the body's normal functioning. It brings with it a large number of uncomfortable side effects such as morning sickness, heartburn, backache, joint instability, breathlessness, circulatory problems, to list but a few. The hormone 'relaxin', which is secreted during pregnancy to soften the body's ligaments in preparation for childbirth, can cause joint instability and lower back pain, which is in turn exacerbated by the forward pull of the growing 'bump'. As pregnancy progresses, the internal organs are squashed and displaced, giving rise to heartburn and breathlessness. The action of the smooth muscle of the intestines slows down, often causing constipation. Additionally, the process of childbirth itself weakens the pelvic floor muscles, which, if not toned up, can lead to stress incontinence. With all of this in mind, Tai Chi can be used as a tool to minimise the discomforts and maximise good health.

Tai Chi Ch'uan, usually shortened to simply 'Tai Chi', means 'wholeness' or 'supreme ultimate' and is based on a series of slow moving, circular, dance-like movements, best performed in the open air. It aims to get people to focus on their mental and emotional state as well as their bodies. Provided it is taught with insight and studied responsibly, it can be the most complete, natural and effective of therapies. It is a highly complex art involving patience, perseverance and the ability to simplify, adapt and change (which will help with the adjustment to parenthood) and should not be looked upon as merely a means of 'working out'.

Tai Chi is based on the belief that illness stems from imbalances, which may be corrected by mentally focusing using various movements. Tai Chi is a relaxing exercise and can be practised by anyone mature enough to concentrate and focus, in any physical condition. Unlike other exercises, you can do Tai Chi at any stage in your pregnancy, simply listen to your body.

As a natural healing process, Tai Chi has for centuries been considered both curative and preventative. Its graceful, flowing movements are particularly effective against conditions such as anxiety and stress because it encourages people to 'let go'. The movements also help to improve breathing and posture and stimulates circulation.

Tai Chi can be practised as an antenatal and postnatal exercise. The gentle twisting, spiralling and squatting movements limber and tone the body. With its combination of fluid movements and deep breathing techniques, Tai Chi offers a complete mind/body workout that builds strength, improves balance and increases flexibility without strain. Tai Chi is very gentle—there are no harsh, strenuous or jerking motions involved, making it the perfect exercise during

pregnancy, even if you've never exercised before.

The concept of 'chi' (a vital life energy that runs through the body) is a very strong belief in Chinese medicine and philosophy. The primary aim of Tai Chi is to improve the circulation of this "chi" throughout the body and by doing so, improve your health and vitality.

Tai Chi, as it is practiced in the west today, can best be described as a combination of yoga in motion and meditation. Tai Chi consists of several so-called forms or sets, which are made up of a sequence of continual movements. Many of these movements originated from the natural movements of animals and birds, which are performed in a slow, graceful manner with one movement flowing gently into the next.

In Tai Chi, you're always moving, but always under complete control. The whole body moves as one, with each part of the body balanced in circular movement—the weight of the body shifts continuously throughout the form as the next movement begins in one fluid motion.

Often referred to as 'moving meditation', this ancient form of martial arts has been practiced in China for centuries. Tai Chi is an ideal pregnancy workout because it:

- Uses gentle, circular motions which tone muscles without straining
- Promotes correct body posture
- Improves balance
- Increases chi, or life energy
- Is easy to learn
- Doesn't require any special equipment
- Is suitable for almost anyone
- Improves blood pressure
- Assists mental well-being through meditative forms
- Improves coordination
- Assists with labour thanks to deep breathing techniques
- Builds arm and leg strength, which will assist in carrying the baby
- Improved flexibility which will help with movement as well as the actual birth of your baby.

Studies have shown that practicing Tai Chi improves memory, concentration and digestion; it also increases circulation, reduces anxiety, eases depression, decreases blood pressure, eases hypertension and improves cardiac health. Studies done at the University of Southern California reveal that Tai Chi classes reduce lower back pain, which is very appealing to those with back pain during pregnancy.

A typical Tai Chi class will expose you to Chi Kung (Working of energy) exercises which is the foundation of your Tai Chi. These exercises supplemented by your Tai Chi form will assist you how to coordinate your breathing with each movement—and this knowledge of controlled breathing can later be used during labour.

If you're interested in learning Tai Chi, it's important to find a qualified instructor who is recognised by a legitimate International recognised Tai Chi Organisation. There are many so called Tai Chi Instructors out there who will cause more harm to you and your baby than good. As always, check with your

physician before beginning any fitness routine. It is advisable to check with your GP before starting any exercise programme while pregnant and remember that there are certain guidelines you need to follow. The body's systems are working much harder, so it is more important to take plenty of rest between sessions. There is much more danger of over-heating, so it is essential to drink plenty of fluid, especially in hot weather. Stop exercising immediately if you begin to feel nauseous.

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