



Let's Dance to Health

Getting Motivated

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Dancing can be magical and transforming. It can breathe new life into a tired soul; make a spirit soar; unleash locked-away creativity; unite generations and cultures; inspire new romances or rekindle old ones; trigger long-forgotten memories; and turn sadness into joy, if only during the dance.

On a more physical level, dancing can give you a great mind-body workout. Researchers are learning that regular physical activity in general can help keep your body, including your brain, healthy as you age. Exercise increases the level of brain chemicals that encourage nerve cells to grow. And dancing that requires you to remember dance steps and sequences boosts brain power by improving memory skills.

There has been some promising research in this area, according to Rita Beckford, M.D., a family doctor and spokesperson for the American Council on Exercise. For instance, a 2003 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that ballroom dancing at least twice a week made people less likely to develop dementia. Research also has shown that some people with Alzheimer's disease are able to recall forgotten memories when they dance to music they used to know.

Whether it's ballet or ballroom, clogging or jazz, dance is great for helping people of all ages and physical abilities get and stay in shape. There's even chair dancing for people with physical limitations. A 150-pound adult can burn about 150 calories doing 30 minutes of moderate social dancing.

Benefits Abound

Like other moderate, low-impact, weight bearing activities, such as brisk walking, cycling or aerobics, dancing can help:

- strengthen bones and muscles without hurting your joints
- tone your entire body
- improve your posture and balance, which can prevent falls
- increase your stamina and flexibility
- reduce stress and tension
- build confidence
- provide opportunities to meet people, and
- ward off illnesses like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, osteoporosis, and depression

So if you're tired of the treadmill and looking for a fun way to stay fit and healthy, it might be time to kick up your heels!

Dipping and Turning

Dancing is a great activity for people age 50 and older because you can vary the level of physical exertion so easily, according to Marian Simpson, a retired dance instructor and president of the National Dance Association.

For instance, people just getting back into dance or physical activity can start out more slowly, then "step it up a notch" by adding things like dips and turns as they progress, says Simpson. The more energy you put into a dance, the more vigorous your workout will be.

Although some dance forms are more rigorous than others - for instance, jazz as opposed to the waltz - all beginners' classes should start you out gradually. Ballroom dance, line dancing, and other kinds of social dance

are most popular among people 50 and older. That's because they allow people to get together and interact socially, while getting some exercise and having fun at the same time. Dancers who have lost partners can come alone and meet new people, since many classes don't require that you attend as a couple.

If your doctor hasn't restricted your activity in any way, you're ready to rock, says Beckford. If you haven't been active or seen the doctor in a while, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Has your doctor ever said you have a heart condition and that you should only do physical activity recommended by a doctor?
2. Do you feel pain in your chest when you do physical activity?
3. In the past month, have you had chest pain when you were not doing physical activity?
4. Do you lose your balance because of dizziness, or do you ever lose consciousness?
5. Do you have a bone or joint problem that could get worse from a change in your physical activity?
6. Is your doctor currently prescribing drugs (for example, water pills) for blood pressure or a heart condition?
7. Do you know of any other reason why you should not do physical activity?

Source: Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (PAR-Q), Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, Inc., 1994

You should make an appointment to see your doctor if you answer "yes" to any of the questions above.

Choosing a Groove

If you don't know what kind of dance you might like, the best thing to do is experiment. If you used to dance and are getting back into it, you can pick up where you left off. Some adults decide to resume ballet classes after years of having had them as children.

If you take a class, give it some time before deciding you don't like it, recommends Colleen Dean, program coordinator for the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. Try going with a friend and keep with it for at least a month. You can find dance classes at a dance school, dance studio, health club, or community recreation center. Some YMCAs, churches, or synagogues offer group dance classes followed by a social hour.

Here are some forms of dance you might want to explore:

- Square dancing
- Swing (traditional or West Coast, which is more technical)
- Line dancing, which can be done to country, rock, pop, or salsa music
- Folk dancing, which can reconnect you to your ethnic roots or introduce you to a whole new culture
- Ballroom
- Belly dancing
- Salsa
- Flamenco
- Jazz
- Tap
- Modern
- Clogging (double-time stomping and tap steps)
- Contra (square dance moves in lines with men and women switching places)

Where to Boogie

Some dance schools or dance halls hold social dances that are open to the public on certain nights of the week. Often, you can take a class before the dance begins.

You also can join a dance club that meets regularly at different places, or join an amateur or professional dance

troupe.

Jim Maxwell, 61, helped form a dance troupe seven years ago that performs at local retirement communities, nursing homes, and community events in the Northern Virginia area. The 37 members, who perform clogging and Irish dance routines, range in age from 9 to 62. The group gives Maxwell and his fellow cloggers an opportunity to perform a useful community service while having fun and staying fit.

"We get the benefits of physical activity, but we also serve our community," says Maxwell, who started dancing because he needed physical activity but hated to exercise. To help recruit people for the troupe, Maxwell began teaching clogging, tap, and Irish dance to all ages at local recreation centers. He now teaches six classes.

"Dancing is a lot of fun, and I like performing," says Maxwell. "[Plus], we actually do things for people. It's not just exercising as an indulgence."

Doing Your Own Thing

If you're afraid you have two left feet or are short on time, you can do your own thing just by turning on some music and dancing around the house. Or turn a night on the town into a dance party by finding a hot spot with a good dance band.

You also can "sweat to the oldies" or sashay around your living room with dance videos that you can buy or rent from your local library or video store (check to see if they're available). So crank up the volume and shake a leg. Once you start dancing, you might not want to stop!

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