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Dance fitness craze: Tips to avoid dance-related injuries

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Regardless of gender or generation, more and more people are moving to the dance floor for a workout that is exciting *and* effective. Dance fitness is the latest trend in gyms and dance studios and is a hot favorite among celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and Evangeline Lilly. Though dance fitness is considered a fun full-body calorie blaster, like other physical activities, it isn't risk-free. If you've embraced dance as your workout du jour, here are some expert tips to make sure you keep dancing injury-free.

Dance-related injuries to the lower body are common

You've become bored with body sculpting and your weekly spin class, so you've shimmied your way into every Zumba, bellydancing, stripaerobix, and even ballroom dancing class offered at your gym. However, now you're having trouble walking when you get up in the morning and you can't seem to shake the aches from your feet up to your lower back. What gives?

"For avid dance fitness goers, the most common injuries are repetitive strain injuries which occur when there is too much stress placed on weak points of the body for long durations of time," says Andrea Wilson, a former ballet dancer and physical trainer at [Methodist Sports Medicine / The Orthopedic Specialists](#).



Wilson explains that the most common injuries are to the foot, ankle, knee and lower back, most often occurring when dance enthusiasts are fatigued (read: too much dance, not enough recovery) or have recently changed their workout parameters (type of exercise, frequency or intensity). "The most common types of strain injuries are medial tibial stress syndrome (shin splints), anterior knee pain and lower back strain. Traumatic or sudden injuries, such as ankle sprains, can also occur," adds Wilson.

Some types of dance present more risks

Though dance is considered a safe and effective modality of fitness, some types of dance can put you at higher risk for injuries.

According to Wilson, certain types of dance, such as ballet, are more injury-prone than other forms of dance. "Ballet, in particular, has a very high incidence of injury because of the extreme stresses and demands it places on the body," warns Wilson. However, any type of dance that involves repetitive impact also puts dance goers at higher risk for injury, particularly for dance participants who are not well prepared for the repetitive movements and positions.

Fitness tips to avoid dance-related injuries

Don't let the potential for injury deter your dance fitness enjoyment – all forms of physical activity present some level of risk. Simply be smart about your dance workouts. Here's how.

Fitness tip #1: Don't be extreme

Though [New Year's](#) resolutions are a wonderful way to jump start your physical fitness, Wilson advises against suddenly starting an intensive dance exercise plan without proper preparation. She says, "In order to avoid dance-related injuries and safely and effectively partake in dance fitness it is essential to gradually increase frequency, intensity and the duration of your exercise." That means take a beginner's class before heading to an advanced level as well as taking one or two classes a week instead of immediately hopping into every class on the schedule.

Fitness tip #2: Take the time to warm up

"Stretch gently and always warm up with a few minutes of light exercise before a dance class," suggests Wilson. "This will allow your muscles to loosen and warm-up and you will be better prepared for a dance-fitness workout." Get to the gym

a few minutes early and do the elliptical or ride the stationary bike to get your body ready to boogie.

Fitness tip #3: Cool down properly

Sure, it's easy to rush out of the dance class to the locker room shower but you'll reduce your risk of injury – and recover faster – if you cool down after your dance workout. Wilson explains, "It is extremely important to allow time for a proper cool down and more intensive stretching after class. This will prevent lactic acid build-up and any unnecessary injuries that might occur if you simply walk out of the class and head on with the rest of your day."

Fitness tip #4: Focus on proper technique

Wilson recommends keenly watching your dance instructor to learn proper dance technique as well as ask questions about moves you are unsure about. She adds, "Proper technique is a key ingredient in the prevention of dance-related injuries. Turning your body the wrong direction or holding a position incorrectly can instantly lead to injuries." Also, listen to your body - if something doesn't feel right, don't do it.

Fitness tip #5: Footwear counts

Before you do a dance-fitness class, ask the dance instructor for recommendations on the best footwear for that particular type of dance. You might be able to get away with your regular [running shoes](#) for a class here and there, but if you plan on partaking frequently, you can prevent unwarranted injuries by investing in appropriate shoes.

Fitness tip #6: Crosstrain

No doubt you get a [full-body workout](#) in most dance fitness classes, but doing only one type of workout puts you at risk for injury. Wilson says many injuries can be prevented with improved posture, flexibility and strength. That means instead of only doing dance classes every week, get in a couple days of strength training, a Pilates class and another type of cardiovascular workout. Not only will you reduce your risk of injury, you will also get more fit and avoid single-workout burn out.

You're hurt, now what?

If you do happen to get a dance-related injury, you can put yourself on a fast road to recovery by refraining from dance classes – and other workouts that exacerbate the injury – and following what Wilson calls the PRICE approach. She advises, “Remember the acronym PRICE – protect the tissues, rest, ice, compress, and elevate an injury. And for persistent problems, I recommend seeing a physical therapist for specific recommendations and exercises.”

Ready to dance injury-free? Try these workouts

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