

Dancing – preventing injury

Dancing is simply moving in time to music. It's a fun and sociable way to exercise. The range of styles is extensive. They include everything from ballroom and jazz ballet to hip-hop and belly dancing – you're sure to find a style that suits you. However, don't forget while you're having fun that dance is a sport that makes demands on your bones and muscles. The most common dance-related injuries involve the foot, ankle and lower back.

Common injuries

Common injuries include:

- **Sprains and strains** – muscles and ligaments can be overstretched or twisted. The knee and ankle are particularly vulnerable.
- **Stress fractures** – dance moves that require force and repetition, such as jumping, can eventually cause small breaks in the bones of the foot and ankle.
- **Tendonitis** – painful inflammation of a tendon (connective tissue that anchors muscle to bone). The Achilles tendon is commonly affected.
- **Blisters** – ill-fitting shoes that chafe can cause blisters on the feet and toes.
- **Toenail injuries** – ill-fitting shoes that crowd the toes may lead to bruising of the toenails or ingrown toenails. Ballet dancers who dance on *pointe* (tiptoe) are especially at risk.
- **Impact injuries** – such as bruises, caused by falling over, bumping into another dancer or tripping over props.

Risk factors

Some of the factors that can increase your risk of injury include:

- **Inexperience** – beginners may be vulnerable to injury because they don't have the skills or technique to meet the physical demands of their chosen dance style. Make sure you follow the instructions of your dance teacher.
- **Poor fitness** – weak muscles are more likely to tear when challenged or stretched. Controlled progressions will improve your fitness and muscle strength.
- **Poor technique** – for example, bringing your foot down to the floor with more force than necessary can injure soft tissue and bone.
- **Poor posture** – weak muscles in the back and abdomen increase the risk of injury to all areas of the body including the spine and legs.

- **Fatigue** – a tired dancer tends to lose form. Falls and injuries caused by sloppy technique are more likely.
- **Hazardous environment** – for example, worn or ripped carpet, hard floor, uneven floor, spilt liquids, or fittings close to the dance area such as stairs.
- **Overtraining** – dancing for too long or too often can lead to a wide range of overuse injuries, particularly to the tendons and bones. Shin splints and stress fractures in the feet are common dance-related overuse injuries.
- **Failure to rest an injury** – returning to dance before an existing injury has healed can aggravate the condition. For example, injured knee ligaments may tear.

General health suggestions

You can reduce your risk of injury if you follow some simple guidelines. Some tips include:

- See your doctor for a check-up if you have a medical condition, are overweight, are over 40 years of age or haven't exercised regularly for a long time.
- Choose a dance style that is appropriate for you. For example, high impact dance styles that involve plenty of jumping and vigorous movements are not appropriate for a person with arthritis.
- Wear layers of clothing that you can take off as your body warms up.
- Do warm-up stretches or activities before you begin the dance session. Cold muscles are more prone to injury.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after dancing.
- Make sure you take sufficient rest between dance sessions. This will minimise muscle soreness or stiffness if you are new to dancing or are not very fit.
- Respect your body's limits. Don't push yourself too far or too fast, especially if you are a beginner.

See over ...

Reducing the risk of knee, ankle and foot injuries

Suggestions include:

- Wear professionally fitted shoes appropriate to your style of dance.
- Warm up before you start dancing. Include sustained stretches (20 to 40 seconds) in your warm-up routine.
- Be sure to specifically warm up your feet and ankles before you start dancing (for example, marching on the spot is a good warm-up exercise).
- Check with your dance instructor that you are holding the correct form.
- Sit and watch new dance moves first. Learning new moves increases the risk of injury, especially if you are already tired.
- Perform regular leg strengthening exercises. Weak knee muscles allow the joint to twist sideways, increasing the risk of ligament injury.
- Move as fluidly and gracefully as you can. Sudden jolting movements greatly increase the risk of knee injury.
- Cool down after a dance session. Include sustained stretches in your cool-down routine.

What to do if you injure yourself

Suggestions include:

- Stop if you feel pain. Continuing to dance will only make the injury worse.
- Treat all soft tissue injuries (such as bruises, sprains and strains) with rest, ice, compression and elevation (raise the area above the level of your heart, if possible).
- Seek advice from your doctor as soon as you can. A proper diagnosis is important.
- Don't resume dancing until you have fully recovered from injury. Returning to dance too soon will turn an acute injury into a chronic injury.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dance instructor
- Physiotherapist
- 'Go for your life' Infoline Tel. 1300 73 98 99
- Victorian Bootscooting Association Tel. (03) 9309 4304
- Victorian Square Dancing Association Tel. 1800 643 277
- Dancesport Victoria (ballroom and competitive dancing) Tel. (03) 9467 6565
- Look in the Yellow Pages for dance schools in your local area.

Things to remember

- Choose a dance style that is appropriate to your level of fitness.
- Wear professionally fitted shoes appropriate to your style of dance.
- Check with your dance instructor that you are holding the correct form.

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