

3 Health Benefits of Dancing

Everyone, ages 1 to 100+, enjoy many benefits from dancing. Although you quickly see the connection between fitness and dance, did you know that social dancing also improves both brain function and mental health? Dance styles change through the years, but everyone – even those with two left feet – who regularly practice dance receive three key benefits.

1. Improved Physical Health

Whether on the dance floor or at the gym, you enjoy the rewards of physical conditioning, increased stamina, improved flexibility and balance, and reduced stress. Regular dancers also experience:

- Lower risk of coronary heart disease
- Decreased blood pressure
- Weight management
- Stronger bones in legs and hips
- Decreased risk for Type 2 diabetes

According to Ken Richards, professional dancer and spokesman for USA Dance, dancing works muscle groups differently than walking, running, and other exercise regimens. For example, the long, sweeping backward steps of the Foxtrot give thighs and buttocks a unique workout.

Dance Off Those Calories!

How many calories you burn while dancing depends on the style of your dance. The following are guidelines from some of the most popular dance styles, based on a 150-pound person, per hour:

- Swing dance: 235 calories
- Ballroom dance: 265
- Square dance: 280
- Ballet: 300
- Salsa dance: 420+
- Aerobic dance: 540+

2. Improved Brain Function

Uniquely blending aerobic exercise with social interaction, dance stimulates the mind. A recent 21-year study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found dancing can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia in the elderly. In this study, participants over the age of 75 who engaged in reading, dancing and playing musical instruments and board games only once a week had a 7 percent lower risk of dementia compared to those who did not. Dancing at least 11 days per month decreased their chances of dementia by 63%.

According to Joe Verghese, a neurologist at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and a lead researcher of the study, dancing can provide a triple benefit for the brain. Dance music engages the mind, the exercise aspect of dancing increases blood flow to the brain, and the social component decreases stress, depression, and loneliness.

As you memorize dance steps and cooperate with a partner, you work out mental challenges that are essential for brain-health at any age.

3. Improved Mental State

"A sound body is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world" – John Locke.

This statement still rings true three centuries later as scientists discover new ways that physical activity affects brain chemistry and our moods. Researchers have known for some time that exercise produces increased endorphins (brain chemicals that reduce pain and increase your sense of well being). The "endorphin high" received from exercise increases the likelihood of repetition. Scientists are also finding that those who maintain the fittest bodies have the fittest brains. These people have more resistance to disease, especially autoimmune diseases.

Regular exercise improves mood, decreases anxiety, improves sleep, increases immune response, improves resilience in the face of stress, and raises self-esteem. These benefits result from chemical changes in the brain. Strenuous exercise can double the blood volume and oxygen entering the brain. Your brain needs blood to carry oxygen in order to operate and circulate the neurotransmitters (brain chemicals such as endorphins).

Dancing also increases the temporal and prefrontal activity of the brain, resulting in improved memory, planning, multi tasking, and attention skills. Professional dancers may give the appearance of effortless grace. What we don't see is their hours of setting up the routine, their studied foot and arm placement while following the partner's subtle cues, and their hours of intensely focused practice. These all contribute to their mental fitness for the challenge.

In the past, it was believed that brain plasticity (ability of the brain to form new connections) was limited to childhood thru early adulthood). This was based on observations that children and adolescents with severe brain injury were more likely to recover cognitive and motor functions than were older patients with the same injury. Although the brain is less "plastic" as it ages, recent research reveal that dancing is an activity that improves even an older brain's ability to form new interconnections and work faster.

References

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JUST FOR FUN-DANCE!

Our classes are designed to help couples have fun while learning how to dance. In the process, they gain confidence, and develop improved communication, respect, and other fundamental relationship skills. Our focus is on enjoyment rather than competition. Each month, JUST FOR FUN-DANCE! offers a beginner level class with a variety of dance styles, a line dance class, and an intermediate class focused on one dance style. Each class meets once a week for 4 weeks. A bonus dance party is held on 5th Fridays during available months throughout the class year.

About the Author

Jo Ellen Christian, MA, NCC is a nationally certified counselor and founder of Healing Strides, LLC. She sets aside her counseling hat to offer JUST FOR FUN-DANCE! students the joy of line dance and couples' dance. She and her husband Kevin have been dancing and teaching together for many years. Her other unique and inspiring Marriage Improvement Programs enrich the lives of families. For more information about Healing Strides or her programs, visit her website at <http://www.HealingStrides.com>.