

Ballroom Dancing May Help Mind, Body, and Spirit

By Miranda Hitti

WebMD Feature Reviewed by Michael W. Smith, MD

Tangos, waltzes, sambas, and foxtrots are gliding across America's TV sets on the hit ballroom dance show, *Dancing with the Stars*.

Do you tap along with the beat as you watch? Or shimmy during the commercial breaks? This may be one time when health experts won't fret if you follow in the footsteps of prime-time TV. Ballroom dancing could help the mind and body, they say.

Shall We Dance?

You're not likely to practice for hours with a world-class dance partner as on the show. But you also won't face live national TV and the judges' barbs.

Will you get a good workout? What about those two left feet? And how can "twinkle toes" benefit your brain?

WebMD posed those questions to science, dance, and fitness pros. Here's their spin on ballroom dancing's health perks.

Is It Exercise?

The TV show's contestants are often winded after their routines. One dancer from last season said he lost 15 pounds.

How typical is that? It depends on the type of dancing and your skill level, says exercise physiologist Catherine Cram, MS, of Comprehensive Fitness Consulting in Middleton, Wis.

"Once someone gets to the point where they're getting their heart rate up, they're actually getting a terrific workout," says Cram.

Dance is a weight-bearing activity, which builds bones. It's also "wonderful" for your upper body and strength, says Cram.

Would-be dancers should consult their doctors first, especially if they have any health problems, says Cram.

Calorie Check

How many calories will you burn? That depends on your body and how vigorously you dance.

Dance is a "moderate activity," say the USDA's physical activity guidelines. Adults should get at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity daily, according to the guidelines.

It can be easier to stick to that with fun activities, says Cram.

Muscles Worked

New ballroom dancers may feel muscles they didn't know they had. That often happens with a new activity, says Ken Richards, spokesman for USA Dance, the national governing body of DanceSport -- the competitive version of ballroom dancing.

Ballroom dancing often means moving backward, especially for women, says Richards, a professional ballroom dancing veteran.

"If you're dancing the foxtrot, you're taking long, sweeping steps backwards. That's very different than walking forward on a treadmill or taking a jog around the neighborhood," he says.

Ballroom dancing works the backs of the thighs and buttock muscles differently from many other types of exercise, says Richards.

Core Experience

The legs and arms often do the flashy dance moves. But they're sunk without a strong body core.

The "core" muscles -- the abs and back -- are also used in Pilates, says Janice Byer. A lifelong dancer, Byer is group exercise director of The Courthouse Athletic Club in Oakland, Calif. Byer and her husband (whom she met through dancing) are avid swing dancers.

Brain Teaser

Dance can challenge your mind as well as your muscles.

At least one observational study has shown sharper minds with ballroom dancing.

The study appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine* two years ago. Joe Verghese, MD, and colleagues studied 469 people who were at least 75 years old.

At the study's start, they answered surveys about mental and physical activities, like doing crossword puzzles or dancing. Back then, none had dementia.

Five years later, 124 had dementia. Frequent dancers had a reduced risk of dementia compared with those who rarely or never danced.

Of 11 physical activities considered, only dancing was tied to a lower dementia risk, Verghese tells WebMD.

Most dancers did ballroom dancing, says Verghese. He's an assistant neurology professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

The Dancing Brain

How might ballroom dancing help the brain? Verghese outlines three possibilities:

Increased blood flow to the brain from the physical exercise

Less stress, depression, and loneliness from dancing's social aspect

Mental challenges (memorizing steps, working with your partner)

"Dance, in many ways, is a complex activity. It's not just purely physical," says Verghese.

An 'Exciting' Option

No one is prescribing ballroom dancing, and Verghese's study doesn't claim dancing drove the results.

To get real proof, a study could assign one group of people to ballroom dancing, comparing them to inactive people.

So says Carl Cotman, PhD. He directs the Institute for Brain Aging and Dementia at the University of California, Irvine.

"There aren't any experimental models in animals that would be equivalent to ballroom dancing, that's for sure," says Cotman. His rat studies have shown brain benefits from voluntary running.

If dance is aerobic enough, it could aid the brain, says Cotman. The social and mental aspects could also help.

"You've got togetherness, and ... training the brain to do a new motor skill," says Cotman. "I think it's pretty exciting."

No one knows how much or what kind of exercise the brain needs, says Cotman. He'd like to see such studies done.

Meanwhile, "there's no evidence that it's going to hurt anything," says Cotman.

Check Your Ego at the Door

Here's some advice for beginners from New York dance therapist Jane Wilson Cathcart, LMSW, ADTR, CMA:

Look for a good teacher who emphasizes what you can do, not your limits.

Don't be a perfectionist about it.

Don't worry about your size. Dance is for everyone.

Get into the music, as well as the movement.

"Take in all the good feedback you're getting and give your inner judge a couple of dollars to go to the movies," says Cathcart.

"We are usually our own worst critic," says Cathcart. "Think of how many other times your critical judge has limited you from doing something."

New skills can bring confidence. At parties and social events, dancers may head to the dance floor feeling good about themselves without a martini's encouragement, Richards jokes.

"Lay the pathwork of positivity through it," says Cathcart. "The coolest dance begins with one step. The rest will follow."