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## Dancing - preventing injury

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### Summary

- Choose a dance style that is appropriate to your level of fitness.
  - Wear professionally fitted shoes appropriate to your style of dance.
  - Warm up thoroughly before you start dancing and include stretches.
  - Check with your dance instructor that you are using the correct posture or technique.
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People dance for a variety of reasons: for fun, recreation and for health. Dance can be social or performed for an audience. It can also be ceremonial or competitive.

Dancing is a great way to be more active and offers a wide range of physical and mental benefits. Dance styles range from ballroom and jazz ballet to hip-hop and belly dancing – you're sure to find a style that suits you.

However, the range of body movements, repetition and speed of movement can put you at risk of an injury, particularly if you are new and learning unfamiliar steps. You can help reduce your risk of injury by being aware of some of these risk factors.

### Reducing the risk of dance injuries

You can reduce your risk of injury when dancing 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.
- If you have a pre-existing problem or injury especially to the foot, ankle or lower back, consult your doctor before starting.
- Choose a dance style that is appropriate for you. Have a basic awareness of your own body and of your own personal limits and boundaries. For example, high impact dance styles that involve jumping and vigorous movements are not appropriate for a person with arthritis.
- Warm up thoroughly before you start dancing and include stretches. This is important in preparing the body for dancing.
- Cool down after a dance session and stretch again.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after dancing.
- Wear layers of clothing that you can take off as your body warms up.
- Wear professionally fitted shoes appropriate to your style of dance. Proper dance shoes distribute load, absorb impact, and support your foot.
- Don't push yourself too far or too fast, especially if you are a beginner.
- Concentrate on correct posture and your dance technique. The way a dancer connects one movement to another must be technically correct so as not to twist the body incorrectly, or strain a muscle.
- Talk with your dance instructor if you have a problem or injury. They may be able to modify the move and teach you a variation to reduce the risk factors.
- Sit down and watch, sometimes you can learn more from watching than actually doing something for the first time.
- Make sure you take sufficient rest between dance sessions, especially if you are new to dancing or are not very fit. This will help minimise muscle soreness or stiffness.

## Dance injury risk factors

Some of the factors that can increase your risk of dance 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 be injured 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. 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.

## Common dance injuries

Common dance injuries include:

- sprains and strains - where muscles and ligaments are overstretched or twisted
- impact injuries – such as bruises caused by falling over, bumping into another dancer or tripping over props
- blisters, bruising and ingrown toenails - ill-fitting shoes can cause all of these foot problems.

## What to do if you injure yourself when dancing

If you injure yourself when dancing, 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 (bandage the swollen area) and Elevation (R.I.C.E.). Using these four immediate first aid measures can relieve pain, limit swelling and protect the injured tissues, all of which help speed healing.
- 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 your injury. Returning to dance too soon will turn an acute injury (an injury that occurs suddenly) into a chronic injury (an 'overuse' injury that gradually worsens over a long time).

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dance instructor
- Physiotherapist
- Smartplay Tel. (02) 6241 9344
- Look in the *Yellow Pages* or search online 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.
- Warm up thoroughly before you start dancing and include stretches.

- Check with your dance instructor that you are using the correct posture or technique.

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