

Dancing – the best exercise

Evelyn resolved that in 1994 she'd exercise regularly. But it's only the beginning of the new year and she's already bored with her new stationary bike. The rowing machine and treadmill at the YWCA also hold little appeal. When a friend coaxed her to go along for an evening of free dance lessons, she realized exercise doesn't have to be a chore. It's true. Whether you're swirling across the floor to a Strauss Waltz or doing do-si-dos to the commands of a square-dance caller, you're getting exercise – and probably having fun too. From burning calories to socializing with friends, dancing offers these health benefits:



Calories – Dancing can burn as many calories as walking, swimming or riding a bicycle. During a half hour of sustained

dancing you can burn between 200 and 400 calories. One factor that determines how many calories

you'll expend is distance. In one study, researchers attached pedometers to square dancers and found each person covered nearly five miles in a single evening.

Cardiovascular conditioning – Regular exercise can lead to a slower heart rate, lower blood pressure and an improved cholesterol profile (see Medical Essay, June 1991). Experts typically recommend 30 to 40 minutes of continuous activity three to four times a week. Dancing may not provide all the conditioning you need, but it can help. The degree of cardiovascular conditioning depends on how vigorously you dance, how long you dance continuously and how regularly you do it.

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Don't be square – dance!

In squares of eight across the country, Americans from senior-citizen age on down are linking arms, sashaying, and “do-si-doing” themselves to longer, healthier, and happier lives. They're having a blast and also lowering their risk of heart disease, diabetes, certain types of cancer, age-related memory loss, osteoporosis, and depression.

“... keeps the mind sharp, potentially staving off age-related memory loss...”

Good for Body and Mind

With all its moving, twisting, and turning, square dancing provides more than the daily dose of heart- and bone-healthy physical activity. Remembering all the calls – from “do-si-do” to ‘alemand’ – keeps the mind sharp, potentially staving off age-related memory loss, experts say. And the companionship that regular square dancing offers is an antidote to depression and loneliness, a statement confirmed by square-dancing advocates everywhere.



Take Larry McKinley, a 62-year-old who has been square dancing for 30-plus years with his wife, Sue – who, incidentally, he met at a square dance. “We do it as often as we can, maybe five or six times a week,” he tells WebMD.

“The listening – and executing the commands – takes deep concentration. The twisting and turning are not too hard on you, but give your body the exercise that it needs,” he says.

“It's very easy once you learn,” he says. “Years ago, I was getting a divorce and didn't want to be a bump on a barstool.” That's when he went to his first dance and got hooked.

McKinley knows what he's talking about. Square

dancing contributes to a more healthy and independent lifestyle, says Lewis Maharam, MD, a sports medicine specialist in New York City and president of the Greater New York Regional Chapter of the American College of Sports Medicine.



“Anything that keeps you active will keep you healthier and feeling younger. In most cases if you can walk, you can square dance, but it's good advice to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise regimen,” says Maharam, also medical director of the Suzuki Rock 'n' Roll Marathon® in San Diego, the Country Music Marathon®, and the New York City Marathon

'If You Can Walk, You Can Square Dance'

“Any weight-bearing exercise, including square dancing, is a major benefit as one ages,” he says. Weight-bearing exercise improves bone health and thus may help stave off the brittle-bone disease osteoporosis.

“Square dancing also helps you with the feeling of where you are in space and with coordination, and this may reduce falls and chances for fractures,” says Maharam. “Regular square dancing may

boost endurance, and being able to tolerate longer

bouts of moving faster may result in improved cardiac function as the heart, a muscle, can become more efficient if trained. Square dancing can be considered a type of cross-training, which helps to offset the muscle loss and strength loss typically associated with normal aging.”

A Social Form of Exercise

“The primary benefit [of square dancing] is the social interaction between people,” says Jerry Reed,

continued on other side

[former] executive director of CALLERLAB, the international association of square-dance callers, with 2,000 members worldwide.

"Most of the activities that people do these days are individual, such as golfing, tennis, and bowling," he says. "Square dancing is kind of unique in that it involves touching hands – we turn, we swing, and that seems to bring us closer together."

And the touching in itself can be beneficial to health, according to studies conducted at the Touch Research Institute in Miami, which showed that

"It takes your mind off of the day-to-day problems..."

regular touching can reduce stress and depression and enhance immune system function.

"It takes your mind off of the day-to-day problems," he says. "All those other worries and thoughts disappear when you are dancing."

Excerpted from Web MD, July 9, 2001

Live Ten Years Longer!

Square Dancing will add ten years to your life, a surprising new study shows. Dr. Arron Blackburn states "It's clear that square dancing is the perfect exercise. It combines all positive aspects of intense physical exercise with none of the negative elements."

Dr. Blackburn said square dancing is a low impact activity requiring constant movement and quick directional changes that help keep the body in shape. The study was based on their physical examination which indicated that both female and male square dancers could expect to live well into their 80's.

Square dance movements raise heart rates like many good aerobic exercises should. All the quick changes of direction loosen and tone up the muscles – but not so severely as to cause injury. In

square dancing, when you're not moving, you're clapping hands and tapping your feet, which all contributes to long term fitness.

"It's clear that square dancing is the perfect exercise."

"You don't see a lot of 55-year-old basketball players, but that's just the age when square dancers are hitting their peak," he said.



Contacts

Are you...

...in a rut and can see no way out?



...bored with exercising alone and getting nowhere?

...ready to listen to your doctor and start moving?

