

# Dance

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Anyone flipping through the TV channels is likely to encounter a reality show with a variation on the dance competition theme. From "Dancing with the Stars" to "So You Think You Can Dance," people are intrigued by this ancient combination of art and athleticism and are enrolling in dance studios all across the country.

Success in dance does not come without cost. The necessary balance of extreme flexibility, solid core strength, and graceful muscular control is often gained at the expense of many aches and pains and long hours of practice. Unfortunately, the simple aches or pains associated with intense training too often become a chronic injury with permanence.

Studies show that anywhere between 5 and 11 injuries occur per every 1000 hours of dance practice. Common injuries include low back strain, painful snapping hip, knee pain, ankle/foot sprains, stress fractures, and tendinitis. These overuse injuries often result from repetitive movements, lack of flexibility and core strength, poor technique, and practice on improper surfaces.

For example, ballet dancers are often encouraged to increase "turnout" (pointing of the feet and lower legs outwards). If turnout is forced incorrectly from the knees and/or feet, dancers may place inappropriate amounts of stress on their ligaments, tendons, bones, and joint cartilage of the lower extremity. If continued, simple aches and pains can progress over time into joint instability, chronic tendonitis/tendinosis, stress fractures, and/or injuries to the dancer's growth plate or joint cartilage. In this case, teaching proper technique, stretching to increase flexibility of the hip rotators, and exercising to enhance core muscle strength are simple ways to allow a ballet dancer to "turnout" more appropriately and help prevent these injuries.

For all types of dance, there are some general tips that can keep you out of trouble. Always increase your practice frequency, duration and intensity gradually. As a general rule, an increase in 10% of your activity level each week is considered safe. Dancers should always wear properly-fitted shoes and include a gradual warm up and cool down into their exercise routine. Gentle stretching of the hip rotators and flexors, quadriceps, hamstrings, and calves, as well as core strengthening and hip stabilization exercises will also help to prevent injuries.

Many dancers also perform a Pilates, yoga, or a core strengthening routine 2-3 days per week in addition to their dance schedules to help build strength and safely improve their flexibility. Watch out for warning signs that indicate an injury may be developing such as:

- Aches and pains that persist for greater than two weeks or seem to worsen over time
- Painful "snapping" in the hip or lower back
- Warmth, redness or swelling in or near a joint
- Pain after acute trauma, such as rolling an ankle or buckling a knee
- Pain that alters the way you are able to walk or dance

If you notice any of these warning signs, it is important to consult a physician familiar with dance injuries.

Dancing is a beautiful expression of grace and athleticism, but also a physically demanding sport that, if overdone, can result in serious and permanent injury. Proper technique, sound training regimens, and a watchful eye for warning signs of injury are crucial to ensure that dancers can remain healthy and keep dancing for a lifetime.

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