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Dance Healthy in the New Year

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “DANCE healthy”? Maybe you warm up a few minutes before you step on the dance floor. Or you take a few days off when you pull your hamstring. Or you change your dance shoes to relieve foot pain.

All good. But are you eating the right foods and hydrating? Are you working on strength training off the dance floor, especially as you age? Are you calming your anxieties arising from competitions or comparison with other dancers? Are you *really* dancing healthy? The new year is a great time to reflect and start new dance (and life) habits.

“The ‘dance healthy’ message is about understanding what you have to do so you can do your dance style,” began Dr. Megin Sabo John, Doctor of Physical Therapy at Twin Cities Orthopedics. “You must take ownership of taking care of your body. There’s a

lot of independent time that comes in managing your body. As you age, that becomes more and more important.”

It is the mission of the nonprofit Minnesota Dance Medicine Foundation (MDMF) to provide education and resources to enable dancers of all genres, ages, and abilities to “dance healthy.” To Dr. Brad Moser, the Twin Cities Orthopedics physician who founded MDMF in 2009 and current board chair, the phrase “dance healthy” is about “listening to your body and understanding the resources available to you when you think something isn’t feeling right. It’s a way to inform dancer athletes of any age that it is important to understand their bodies, understand that injuries can happen and are preventable, that nutrition is imperative, and hydration important. Whether it is the medical side...the nutrition side, or the mental health

side...the links on the website are an important community resource,” Dr. Moser said.

MDMF was founded around collegial educational conferencing—sometimes tapping national experts—both to teach dancers about their health and to educate medical providers about dance medicine. MDMF also operates a free clinic in the Cowles Center in downtown Minneapolis, where dancers, who are often underinsured, receive treatment from volunteer professional health care providers. Though clinic services are limited during the pandemic, Dr. John, an MDMF board member, continues to treat dancers of the James Sewell Ballet at the clinic as their lead physical therapist since 2013.

So, how might these providers advise dancers in middle or older life to dance healthy? To start, don’t skip the warm-up.

“If you go cross country skiing in Minnesota, nobody warms up. Dancers do the same thing. Dance shouldn’t be the warm-up,” began John. “And you can’t just dance. You have to do some

supplemental things, whether strength training, sleeping, nutrition, and all of the recovery work. The recovery side is something we talk about more now, but as you age you need to support your body.”

That may mean massage, acupuncture, chiropractic, or other “maintenance” on your body. If you are learning new skills, your body will respond to that with pain, dysfunction or limitations. You wake up sore. Is it a good sore or a bad sore? Can you work through it? It is important to understand good pain vs. bad pain, chronic pain vs. acute pain.

Ashley Takekawa, also a Doctor of Physical Therapy, advises in her paper on the MDMF website: “The injured dancers that I see are very rarely lacking range of motion or flexibility. Dancers tend to be hypermobile and tend to over-stretch their muscles.

They are almost always lacking proper strength/stability. So, rather than spending your precious time stretching, work on getting stronger instead.” Lifting weights is an excellent way to build strength, she says, provided you use proper techniques.

Dr. Takekawa’s paper is just one of many online resources written by dance medicine providers on the MDMF website at www.mndancemed.org that can help dancers of all ages and genres. Check them out! Here are more highlights:

Rehabilitation Following Injury

Rehabilitation after injury is a special focus for Dr. John. She stresses the importance of including specific activities that can be performed during rehab, rather than just restrictions.

She sets out the following healing time frames:

It generally takes tissue (muscle, ligament, tendons) between 6-8 weeks to heal. Ligaments and muscles respond well to the PRICED method in the first 24 hours (see box below). During the first phase of rehab (0-4 weeks) treatment may include isometrics and treatment aimed at restarting motion. During the next phase (4-10 weeks) rehab will likely include strengthening and more dynamic programming such as plyometrics. Bone injuries take between 4-6 weeks in a protected phase which may include reduced weight bearing. Around 4-6 weeks you may be allowed to start loading the bone with more weight bearing, and after 12 weeks, your bones should be able to withstand normal forces.

Treating Acute Injuries

Dr. Megin Sabo John

PRICED is an acronym to help you decide how to care for yourself during the first 24 hours of a new injury

Protection: Protect the area from further injury by removing yourself from class or rehearsal

Rest: Stop dancing on the injured area until you can assess your injury

Ice: Apply ice every two hours; ice packs 15-20 min or ice massage 5-10 min

Compression: Apply elastic compression to injured area, if possible, to reduce swelling

Elevation: Elevate injured area by lifting above level of your heart

Diagnosis: Seek care of a healthcare provider who understands dance

Please refer to IADMS Resource Paper First Aid for dancers for detailed information.



Dr. Brad Moser of Twin Cities Orthopedics, the “Go-To” doctor in dance medicine in the Twin Cities, evaluates the leg of a dancer athlete. Photo provided by Minnesota Dance Medicine Foundation.

Mental Health Support

There are many issues around mental health that can arise for dancers, from overtraining to competitiveness, body image concerns, and loss of identity, especially if you are injured. How can dancers manage stress, overcome fear of re-injury, and redefine a sense of identity as a dancer? Maggan McQuillan, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, offers breathing techniques as the easiest stress management technique in her paper on the MDMF website. If your nervousness (perhaps before a ballroom dance competition) ignites the Fight, Flight and Freeze response of rapid shallow breathing, rapid heart rate, blood pulled from the digestive tract, and inability to use logical thought, she writes:

Breathe deeply with the abdomen with a five slow-count inhale, five slow-count exhale, repeating 10 times; (this) will usually transition the brain and body into the parasympathetic response. This (triggers) the body to slow the heartbeat, relax tension, and most importantly, allow the brain to work fully, using logical thinking. A more extreme breathing method is the “square,” to inhale for four slow counts, hold breath for four slow counts, exhale for four slow counts and hold breath for four slow counts, repeating 10 times. It is virtually impossible for someone to track anxious thinking and consciously hold their breath.

Regarding fear of re-injury, McQuillan suggests staying involved in class and rehearsal to make the time advantageous as a learning opportunity. That will also help make a more seamless return, as isolation can make return very difficult.

Finally, redefinition of identity can be an important issue for dancers, as Dr. John, a ballet and African dancer

herself, discovered when seeking more recreational dance opportunities outside of stage performance.

“I think it is a tricky transition from being a performer on stage to a different kind of dancing. People ask me now, ‘Were you a dancer?’ I’m *always* a dancer. Identity starts to shift as we age, and the way we participate changes.” Dr. John turned to partner dancing, enjoying the identity of being a social dancer.

But that isn’t always easy. With younger dancers, particularly performers, “your sense of identity is really wrapped up in who you are as an athlete. If you are a basketball player, it is the same thing. If you can’t do it for some reason, you lose that little bit of who you are,” continued Dr. John. “I’ve seen that with patients as well. You have to redefine that as you age; you go through multiple stages. As social dancers age and they have kids, they have less time, and they go through a withdrawal of dance. It’s a good stress reliever, so without it there is a little floundering. I experienced that in physical therapy school in North Dakota where there was no dance. I was a little lost. I danced at home a lot and did some solo jazz stuff just to feed my soul.” She later began aerial courses to fill that artistic outlet.

Nutrition for Injury Prevention and Healing

According to Licensed Dietician Val Schonberg (certified in Sports Dietetics) who wrote for the MDMF website, very few dancers know how to use food and nutrition to prevent injury and improve healing. Here are some of her practical tips to prevent injuries with nutrition:

- Permit yourself to eat enough food during your most active time of day, about every 3-4 hours. Skipping meals/snacks

usually decreases mental focus and increases fatigue. Being overly hungry often leads to overeating less healthy foods and increased cravings for unhealthy quick energy sources.

- Avoid relying on highly processed, convenient foods and drinks including sports bars and energy drinks.
- Add color to your plate by increasing your daily intake of richly colored yellow, orange and red fruits and vegetables. They are rich in antioxidants and important vitamins and minerals that manage inflammation. Dark leafy greens like spinach and kale are also good.
- Prioritize protein especially as part of a recovery snack after a period of dancing.
- Include healthy fats such as omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, tuna, ground flaxseed, walnuts). Nuts and seeds are also an excellent source of Vitamin E, essential to the healing process, and are anti-inflammatory.
- Stay hydrated.

To return to the initial question: What does it mean to *you* to dance healthy? There’s still time to begin 2022 with a new commitment and ownership of taking physical, mental and nutritional care of you, the dance athlete.

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