

Shall *we* Dance?

BY LINDA BENTON

Perhaps Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were onto something. Each enjoyed full and active lives and lived into their 80s. Their secret? Besides good genes, dance may have played a major role in their longevity. A study by the Lancisi Heart Institute in Italy found that those who danced three times per week improved oxygen health by 18 percent, while a study by the University of Missouri found that dance can improve both balance and gait. Meanwhile, a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that people who took part in ballroom dancing twice a week had a lower incidence of dementia. The benefits of dancing abound.



Why Dance?

Unlike many other fitness activities, dance is a go-at-your-own pace choice. There is no winner and no loser. There is no scoreboard, clocks or quarters. It doesn't require special equipment, and it's an all-season activity as its venue is a gym, dancehall or studio.

The main prerequisite for dance is just a desire to learn and have a good time. Many people shy away from dancing because they are critical of themselves or feel they are incapable of learning dance steps. But dancing opportunities abound for people at all levels, and worries about incompetence or size shouldn't prevent anyone from trying it. And once seniors finally hit the dance floor, they can prepare themselves for signs of improved health.

Physical Health Benefits

Increased Circulation and Heart Health: Older people may reduce regular amounts of exercise because of increased aches and pains. However, the American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week to maintain heart health in adults. Dancing can easily fill this requirement in a low-impact way with full-body movements. As dancers listen to the beat of the music and get their bodies moving, their heart rate increases. Dancing gets the lungs and circulatory system involved too, bringing oxygen-rich blood to the muscles and brain. And because dance is fun, seniors are more likely to stay engaged in the activity for longer periods of time.

Dare to Dance

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On January 20, 2011, Alison Smiley collapsed in a parking lot outside of the Mountain Arts Community Center on Signal Mountain. She was still conscious, but was unable to speak or move her right side. Although she had no previous warning signs, this young, active mother of two had suffered a stroke.

Following emergency surgery and a week of recovery, she was transferred to Siskin Hospital. Upon arriving, Alison had limited use of her right hand and leg and experienced many speech and swallowing deficits. As an Inpatient, Alison participated in Physical, Occupational and Speech therapies, including VitalStim treatment to help reactivate her swallowing ability.

In less than a year, Alison has made remarkable improvements. She is now able to swallow, speak, walk and care for her children. She continues in Outpatient therapy to work on her speech, as well as the movement in her right hand.

Her faith, family and friends, along with the caring staff at Siskin Hospital, helped Alison return to a healthy life, but most importantly, helped her return to being a wife and mother.



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Dr. Melissa Talbert,
Instructor of Geriatric Medicine,
University of Tennessee Family
Medicine Department

Dancing is a great way to work up a sweat and take off the pounds that put you at an increased risk of diabetes or heart disease!

Stronger Bones and Muscles: As people age, their lifestyles tend to become sedentary. This inactivity leads to higher body fat ratios and muscle loss, and muscle loss leads to decreased balance and strength. Dance keeps the muscles active and strong, keeping seniors nimble and flexible. In fact, some professional dancers say new ballroom dancers may feel muscles they didn't know they had. As a weight bearing activity, dance also increases bone density, reducing the likelihood of broken bones as the result of a fall. Even the National Osteoporosis Foundation recommends dancing as one way to improve bone health.

Weight Management and Joint Health: Forget the treadmill to burn off calories. Dancing is a great way to work up a sweat and take off the pounds that put you at an increased risk of diabetes or heart disease.

By maintaining a healthy weight, you will also protect the health of your joints, reducing the risk of joint replacement surgery in the future.

Mental Health Benefits

Increased Social Activity: For senior citizens living alone, dance can be a great outlet to meet new people and stay connected with others. Dr. Melissa Talbert, instructor of geriatric medicine at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, says dance is more than just a great way for seniors to achieve physical fitness. "When people retire, they can become isolated and isolation can often lead to depression," she says. "Dance classes and dance clubs not only give seniors a great opportunity to get moving. They provide much needed social interaction."

Dementia Prevention: Any fitness activity like walking, yoga, golf or swimming can provide a good workout, but dance is one of the few recognized fitness activities which also helps with mental


fitness. As a person ages, neural pathways can become blocked by plaque, causing mini strokes; or become weakened from lack of use, causing short term memory loss. Dance challenges the brain with a host of variables including new dance steps, new music, and even a new dance partner, giving the brain a great mental "workout." By engaging the brain in learning something new, neural pathways are developed, keeping the brain active. As an added benefit, dancers will feel a sense of accomplishment and an increased level of self-esteem from learning something challenging.

Improved Mood: Need one more reason to dance? Because it feels good! The combination of movement and music is unlike most fitness activities. It engages the whole person—physically, mentally and emotionally. Have you ever seen a "Dancing with the Stars" contestant with a frown on their face? Perhaps that's because dance produces serotonin, dopamine and endorphins in the brain—all natural mood lifters.



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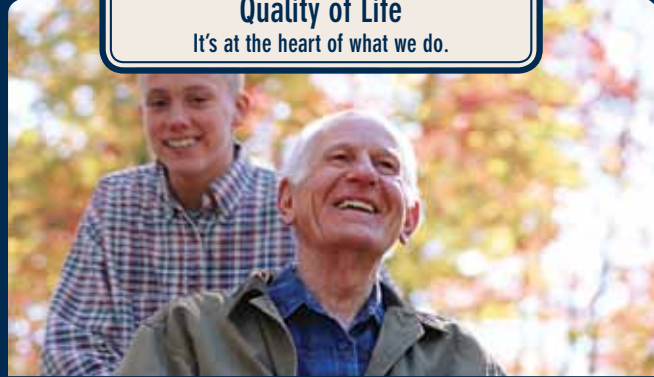
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Dance Today

In and around Chattanooga, people can find a wide range of dance classes and clubs at local churches, community centers, colleges and private studios. Square dancing, ballroom, tap dancing, Zumba Fitness® and line dancing offer the full benefits of physical and mental fitness with the added benefit of socializing with others who share the same passion. The degree to which you benefit from dancing depends on the type of dance, how strenuous it is, the duration and your skill level. Slower dances with minimal locomotion should be chosen for

individuals with minimal fitness levels. However, as fitness levels improve, the tempo and amount of space that steps cover can increase.

While most seniors tend to gravitate to traditional ballroom dance and square dance, some sassy seniors across the nation have even taken up hip-hop, a street-style inspired dance popularized in the 70s. These energetic seniors are also performing at NBA home games, assisted living facilities, intergenerational events and other venues. Dance teams like the Orlando Magic Silver Stars or the Chicago Bulls Swingin' Seniors have

received standing ovations from throngs of fired up fans. Ranging in age from 60 to 80, many of these dancers have had joint replacements and even pacemakers, but they say that dancing makes them feel young again. They joke that even though they are AARP card holders, they aren't ready to give up their dance cards yet.

Take The Lead

Find out more about ballroom dancing in Chattanooga. The Choo Choo Chapter #2009 of USA Dance, Inc. is a non-profit social dance club that organizes and promotes ballroom dancing in Chattanooga, Southeast Tennessee and Northwest Georgia. The club hosts lessons and dances each month and partners are not necessary to participate. For more information on ballroom dancing: www.chattanoogausadance.com.

Linda Benton is a resident of Signal Mountain. She earned the distinction of magna cum laude with a B.B.A. in Marketing from the University of Memphis. Linda has been an active member and leader of community and health organizations. She is married to Dr. Oliver Benton III and has three children.



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