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# dance FOR HEALTH

Dancing seems like too much fun to be exercise! But studies show it can have the same physical benefits as a 'real' workout – and the psychological benefits may be better, says exercise physiologist Caitlin Reid.

**1 Burns kilojoules:** Dancing is a great way to burn kilojoules, and the more energetic your dancing, the more kilojoules you burn. A 65kg person doing ballet or belly dancing burns 1360kJ per hour, while an hour of high impact aerobic dancing burns 1900kJ. So shake your groove thing!

**2 Promotes a healthy heart:** Just like other forms of exercise, dancing can keep your heart healthy. Being a total body work-out, it improves blood flow, strengthens your heart, lowers blood pressure and improves cholesterol levels. To get these benefits, aim for at least 30 minutes a day.

**3 Boosts fitness:** Dancing gets your heart racing and can improve your fitness levels (depending on your style of dance, how long and how regularly you hit the dance floor).

**4 Strengthens bones:** As a weight-bearing activity, dancing is excellent for strengthening bones. Dancing causes the muscles to pull on the bone, which builds denser, stronger bones in children and adolescents, and maintains bone strength in adults. Researchers studying female recreational ballet dancers between 8–14 years of age showed higher bone mineral content in their hips and spine than non-dancers.

**5 Boosts mood:** Dancing increases the production of endorphins, boosting mood. One study found that people participating in hip-hop dancing or aerobics rated their wellbeing as higher than people participating in body conditioning or ice skating. The hip-hop dancers also felt less psychological distress right after exercise. Dance is also used to improve the mental and

physical wellbeing of people with chronic illnesses, based on the belief that the mind and body work together to promote healing. One US study on the effects of dance therapy found that breast cancer survivors who participated in a 12-week dance and movement program showed improvements in measures of both body image and quality of life.

**6 Improves balance and mobility:** As dance movements are multi-directional, instead of the straightforward motion on treadmills and bikes, joint mobility may benefit. One study of young adults found improvements in both hip motion and spine flexibility after following a three-month dance program.

**7 Enhances sociability:** Unlike swimming or going to the gym, dancing has a social element to it. It provides an opportunity to develop strong social ties, which boosts self-esteem and promotes a positive outlook. Research shows that dancing can be particularly beneficial as a form of leisure activity for the elderly.

## Getting started

Whatever form of dance you try, make sure you follow these simple rules:

**#1: Warm up properly** As with all forms of exercise, it's vital you warm up beforehand. Spend time walking, stretching or lightly practising a few dance steps to prepare your muscles for the activity.

**#2: Wear good shoes** Dance shoes often don't have the kind of cushioning and support that other exercise shoes offer. Select comfortable shoes whenever possible.

**#3: Ease into it** Start slowly, with less demanding moves, and build up to faster tempos. This will help reduce the chance of muscle strains.

**#4: Know when to stop** It's easy to get swept away. But as with any activity, pacing yourself and listening to your body is most important. Challenge yourself to learn new moves, but know your limits and don't push past them or you could injure yourself. **hfg**

## COMPARING KILOJOULES

TYPE OF EXERCISE	KILOJOULES BURNT
Cycling at a moderate pace	2190kJ
High-impact dancing (eg hip hop)	1900kJ
Swimming, freestyle	1900kJ
Game of doubles tennis	1640kJ
Low-impact dancing (eg belly dancing)	1360kJ
Brisk walk	1270kJ
Golf	1230kJ

\* Based on a 65kg person exercising for one hour.

