

## Fitness FAQs

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### [Why is it important for me to develop my fitness as a dancer?](#)

Being a dancer in training or a professional dancer with a busy training and performance schedule is highly demanding on the body. Long training and rehearsal days coupled with limited rest time often means that dancers are working in a state of fatigue. Research has not yet specifically proven that 'fitter dancers are better dancers', but there are certainly many ways in which being fitter could help to support your dance training and performance. Most of these are related to a reduction in the level of strain placed upon the body by dance activity when the body is fitter and therefore more able to cope with the physical demands. In other words, the fitter you are, the easier completing a set task will feel. Increased fitness is linked with a delay in the onset of feelings of fatigue and both acute (sudden) and chronic (overuse) injuries in dance are often attributed to fatigue.

It is also important to remember that fitness is defined as 'being able to meet the demands of a specific role or task'. This encompasses many components, including: cardiorespiratory fitness (sometimes referred to as stamina), strength, endurance, power, speed, agility, coordination, flexibility, and balance. It is easy to think of examples of dance movements that require each of these components, so it is important to ensure you are developing all of these when aiming to develop your overall fitness levels to support your dance training and performance. Overtraining one aspect may be at the detriment of the others.

### [I need to develop my stamina but what is the best exercise to do to supplement my dance training?](#)

Stamina could be described as the ability to keep going in a demanding role or class. It is not clear whether stamina enhances dance performance; however, it does assist in decreasing recovery time between dance sequences and delaying the onset of fatigue, an important factor in the causes of injury. Dance classes usually have as their main focus the learning of technique or choreography and have been shown to be fairly 'stop start' in nature. They therefore tend not provide enough continuous time working at a sufficiently high intensity to challenge and improve your fitness. It is up to the individual dancer how much and what kind of supplementary fitness training they might need/want take to up, however some general recommendations can be made to ensure you get the most out of your training.

To increase aerobic fitness, or stamina, gradually building up to 30 minutes two or three times a week of aerobic exercise, will help. Continuous exercise at a lower intensity will help you to build a base of aerobic fitness, however, performing interval training (short bursts of high intensity followed by lower intensity periods) will help to improve your anaerobic fitness, your aerobic capacity, and your endurance/stamina. The ideal exercise mode should resemble dance as closely as possible and it is best to try and choose a type of exercise that you enjoy and can fit into your schedule easily. Brisk walking, running, swimming, rowing (there is evidence that this may help to improve lumbar vertebrae bone density - a problem area for some dancers) or cycling are all forms of exercise you might choose (*see more advice on running below*). Always listen to your body, don't overwork and obviously always perform a warm up and cool down, making sure you stretch afterwards. Expect muscles to feel sore the next day at the beginning of any new training regime.

### **I have heard that running isn't the best form of cross training for dancers. Is this true?**

There is an argument put forward by some orthopaedists and dance educators that dancers already achieve a large amount of impact loading in their training and performance and that increasing this may increase the risk of injuries such as stress fractures. However, there isn't any scientific evidence to support this and some would even suggest (as bone gets stronger when the demands on it are higher) that the additional impact work may actually decrease the risk of stress fractures, particularly if the loading is of a slightly different nature to that which occurs during dance.

Physiologists would encourage all dancers to increase their aerobic capacity (cardio-respiratory fitness) to reduce fatigue experienced during dance activity, and therefore injury risk, and there is no doubt that running, following a correct training regime, will do this fast and effectively. Many would consider running an ideal form of exercise for dancers to take; they will have a greater increase in aerobic fitness compared to if they do non-impact forms of exercise, it is more dance specific in movement terms (than swimming or cycling for example), and it utilises the internal rotators which are often under-developed in dancers.

Problems will only really arise if dancers head into any supplementary training regime too quickly, without careful consideration of what they are doing, why, and when. For example, it may not be best to begin a new fitness training regime during a busy training and performance time. Perhaps start during a break or holiday to allow the body time to adapt. Dancers need to make sure that they wear good supportive running shoes and run with a biomechanically sound technique (in particular, ensuring you are not running turned-out!). Avoid, where possible, running on concrete surfaces to help avoid undue stress on the lower limbs. Due to the intermittent (stop-go) nature of most dance activity, interval training is likely to be a highly appropriate for improving dance specific fitness. Therefore, start by jogging for 1 minute, followed by walking for 1 minute, and try to keep this going for 20 minutes in total. Gradually increase the amount of jogging over time and decrease the walking time. Once you can jog for 20 minutes start to play with different running speeds to continue the interval training approach (1-2mins running faster, 1-2mins running slower, etc.).

### **Should dancers lift weights?**

There are a lot of myths and fears surrounding weightlifting in dance, but don't let these put you off as there are many benefits you could gain from adding this to your supplementary fitness training regime. Having the adequate strength to complete demanding movements, including lifts, and having high levels of muscular endurance to resist fatigue can help to avoid injury. Accessing greater strength and power may also help to expand the breath of your movement

capabilities. Male and female dancers alike could benefit from weight training, despite common misconceptions that heavy weights are just for men.

Another myth is that weight training decreases your flexibility. By ensuring you work through a full range of movement in any exercise, stretch properly following any workout, and continue your usual flexibility training you will maintain (and perhaps even improve) your flexibility.

Mostly commonly, dancers state a fear of becoming too 'bulky' through weight training. Hypertrophy (increase in muscle size) is one possible outcome of weight training but it depends upon specific targeting of exercises for this goal and a lot of hard work. The amount of repetitions and sets you complete of any one exercise as well as the amount of time you rest between sets and, of course, the amount of weight you lift will determine the adaptation that occurs as a result of the training. You can target your weight lifting to focus on muscular power, strength, or endurance, all without necessarily increasing the size of the muscle dramatically.

	<b>Reps</b>	<b>Sets*</b>	<b>Intensity</b>	<b>Rest period</b>
<b>Endurance</b>	≥12	2-3	≤67%	≤30 sec
<b>Hypertrophy</b>	6-12	3-6	67-85%	30 sec – 1.5 min
<b>Strength</b>	≤6	2-6	≥85%	2-5 min
<b>Power</b>				
-Single effort	1-2	3-5	80-90%	2-5 min
-Multi-effort	3-5	3-5	75-85%	2-5 min

\*Not including warm up sets

Baechle, T.R. & Earl, R.W. (2008). Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning.

In order to ensure your weight training is safe and effective consider gaining some coaching from an appropriately qualified professional first so that you can learn the correct technique, which is very important to avoid injuries (as with dance technique). Other top tips include: gradually building up weight over time, appropriately warming up and cooling down, and alternate which muscles you are working, to avoid developing muscular imbalance, e.g. work hamstrings as well as quadriceps.