



Cross Training for Dancers

What is Cross Training?

Cross training is any type of physical activity, other than dancing, that improves your fitness and dance ability. These activities give your body a break from dancing and work on your strength, endurance, balance, agility, and power. Cross training in the off-season allows your body and mind to recover from the grueling dance season and prepares you to dance stronger.

Why Should Dancers Cross Train?

Contrary to popular belief, solely dancing is not enough for a dancer to reach their full potential. Cross training with different types of exercise both makes you a better dancer and it also helps prevent overuse injuries.

Doing other types of exercise during the season and off-season helps dancers build/maintain strength and stability. Strength and stability will help improve your leaps, jumps, kicks, and turns, and give you the stamina you need to get through your routines. Dancers should be on a strengthening program even during the season (with less intensity than the off-season to prevent excessive fatigue/burnout). It is also vital for all dancers to learn how to find neutral posture and train in that position because you are rarely neutral while dancing.

Health experts recommend at least a 3-month break from your sport/activity each year to prevent injuries. However, that does not mean you should be sedentary during those 3 months off; it means you should be doing activities other than dance to keep your body in shape. In the off-season, it is important to train in ways that your body is not used to. For example, dancers spend most of their time in turn-out, so it is crucial that they work in parallel while cross training.

How Should Dancers Cross Train?

Dance is both an aerobic and anaerobic activity, therefore dancers should try to incorporate both activities into their cross training. Aerobic activity is defined as an activity that requires oxygen, raises your heart rate, and can be sustained for long periods of time. Anaerobic activity is without oxygen and can only be sustained for less than 3 minutes (i.e. in dance, this would include leaps, jumps, holding sustained poses).

Examples of Aerobic Exercise:

Running	Walking	Rollerblading
Swimming	Skiing	Elliptical
Spin Class/Biking	Group fitness classes such as step aerobics, Zumba	



Examples of Anaerobic Exercise:

Weight lifting (strength training)	Agility drills	Plyometrics
Pilates	High Intensity Interval Training	Jump Rope

How Do You Build Strength?

Strength training is crucial for dancers and is the one thing that many dancers neglect. In order to perform to your fullest potential and minimize injuries, you need to have a strong foundation throughout your entire body. One excellent way to build strength is by lifting weights. However, proper weight-lifting technique is of utmost importance to build strength and avoiding getting injured. Be sure to consult with a physical therapist, physical therapist assistant, athletic trainer, strength and conditioning specialist, or personal trainer to learn proper form and safety.

In order to increase strength, you want to work your muscles to fatigue; you should be fatigued within 8-12 repetitions. This may not require any added weight initially. For example, you may need to start with a lunge in place without holding any weight. Once you are able to do 3 sets of 8-12 repetitions with good form, you could then add weight to increase the intensity by holding a 5-pound dumbbell in each hand. Strength training should be performed 2-3 days/week and include 2-3 sets of 8-12 repetitions of 8-10 different exercises targeting all the major muscle groups. Rest days in between strength-training days are important to allow muscles to recover/rebuild.

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.

This resource paper was written by Ashley Takekawa, PT, DPT, ATC under the auspices of Minnesota Dance Medicine Foundation

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