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Tips for Seniors: The Benefits of Dance for the Elderly

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I recently ran into two good friends of mine, an older couple who had moved away from the cold Idaho winters to the warmth of Arizona. I asked about their move, as they told me they now lived farther away from their children

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and grandchildren. To my surprise, they said the weather was not the main reason for their move—they moved to be near a ballroom dancing community. I had no idea they loved dancing that much, and I was intrigued that dancing could motivate them to make such a drastic change and move so far away. They are passionate about dancing—and dancing with friends.

Dance and music bring people together in a fun environment. It is an activity that can be enjoyed at any age, and for senior citizens, dancing can be a fun form of exercise that strengthens muscles, helps prevent falls and increases social interaction.

Bupa, a company who oversees more than 300 care homes in the UK, outlines the key benefits of dance for seniors:

1. Dance helps to improve balance.

This benefit is evident in a study of a group of social dancers from the Bronx, who were an average age of 80 years old. These seniors danced an average of four days a month and had been dancing for an average of 30 years. When compared with a control group of non-dancing seniors, the dancers weren't stronger than the non-dancers, but they had better balance and "longer steps and strides reflecting a better walking pattern." This is what helps to prevent falls. Dance is also linked to improved "balance confidence," when seniors are less afraid of falling and more confident in their stability.

2. Dance improves strength and gait.

One study found that a group of senior citizens who participated twice a week, for ten weeks, in an Argentine tango class had increased lower body strength and a longer, stronger walking stride compared to a similar group who exercised by walking for the same amount of time. Studies have found that seniors who have previously fallen or who are afraid of falling can gain confidence and strength through dance.

3. Dance helps improve cognitive abilities.

In a group of older dancers studied in Sweden in 2010, seniors who had danced on an amateur level for an average of 16 years were found to have better "reaction time, motor behavior and cognitive performance." Dance often requires memorizing routines and movements. When done over and over, for many years, these movements can become second-nature and a part of our everyday movement, even when we're not dancing.

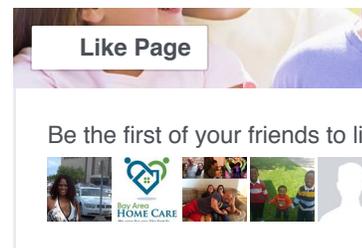
4. Dancing has social benefits.

Participants in dance programs find it to be a fun experience. Because of this, seniors are less likely to drop out and more likely to reap the benefits of

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the program than they would with an ordinary exercise program. Dance can also help prevent loneliness and isolation among seniors.

These benefits of dancing are evident in programs such as Benevolent Ballet–Fall Prevention for the Elderly. Cindy Shepherd^[1], facilitator at Heritage Park Continuing Care Retirement Community in Fort Wayne, Indiana, put this program to the test with the residents of the community. Benevolent Ballet is a program that teaches seniors simple ballet moves and routines. Seniors begin with learning simple arm and leg movements, and when those are mastered, they move on to more complex leg lifts, side kicks and classical ballet foot positions. Seniors also learn how to center their weight and sway from side to side, mimicking the hip movements used when walking. The program works for almost anyone, no matter their abilities or disabilities. Active seniors can do higher leg lifts and quicker movements. Wheelchair bound seniors can move to the music using only their arms. Those who have limited movement on one side of their body can move with the unimpaired side of their body. Cindy says she is even surprised at how many men enjoy the music and movement. She notes that dancing seems to transport many seniors back to a time when they were young—a time when they used to dance much more often.

Seniors should always consult your doctor before beginning a new exercise activity, but dance is an easy exercise that can be tailored to anyone’s unique abilities. The nice thing about dancing is that it isn’t a sport with winners or losers, and each dancer’s personality can shine through the movements. You don’t have to be the next Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers—you can just have fun and enjoy the time spent with friends. Though my friends chose to move in order to have more opportunities to dance, most seniors don’t need to leave their local community to find such opportunities. Many communities have a wide variety of dance programs available. Find a program in your area—and let’s dance!

^[1] Shepherd, Cindy. “Balance Through Ballet.” *Nursing Home Magazine*. September 2003, pg. 47 & 48.

By bestofhomecare.com | October 29th, 2013 | [Articles](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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Joanne July 29, 2016 at 9:21 am

Love this! One of our senior clients goes dancing every week at a local restaurant; our senior care provider provides transport, companionship, memory care and safety. Despite vision, memory, and mobility limitations, this 90 year old vet has a blast!

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