

DANCING: JUST FOR THE FUN (AND THE HEALTH) OF IT!

Actor John O'Hurley, a contestant in ABC's "Dancing With the Stars," is perhaps the country's best known poster boy for the fitness benefits of partner dancing. He wowed audiences with his dramatic interpretations of swing, waltz, cha-cha, tango and fast-step and dropped 20 pounds over a very few weeks of intense partner dancing. He told an interviewer he also gained "flexibility I haven't had in years."

As a nation, we are facing what the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention call "a crisis of poor nutrition and physical activity." The obesity rate in the US is nearly 25%, and more than 65% of us are overweight.

As you set your health and fitness goals, consider what taking a dance class with Northwest Dance can do for you. Start dancing and you will:

Improve your general health. The federal government has introduced an initiative, HealthierUS, which recommends incorporating more physical activity into your daily life as one simple step toward healthier living.

Increase your heart health. Studies show that making connections with others is associated with a lower risk of heart diseases. You'll meet lots of new people and start down a fun path to healthiness in an NDN dance class.

Lose weight A half-hour of sustained dancing can burn from 200 to 400 calories. A study at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center showed that taking 2,000 extra steps each day will prevent the 2-pound-a-year weight gain most Americans experience. During a recent Latin Club Dance class, one NDN student (wearing a pedometer) counted 1,394 steps. A recent Salsa class led another student through 1,050 steps. He said, "I think we usually move more! This time, Jim and Jodi were demonstrating lots of new moves so we watched a little more than usual."

Manage your stress. Movement reduces your level of cortisol, the stress-producing hormone.

Protect against Alzheimer's. A study by the Albert Einstein Center found partner dancing to be the only regular physical activity associated with a significant drop in the incidence of dementia.

Release endorphins. Movement releases the brain's feel-good hormones (think runner's high without the running).

Get off the couch. Studies show a direct correlation between the number of hours spent watching television and the amount a person is overweight. Get out of the house and dance!

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Improve your mood. A Duke University study concluded that 45 minutes of exercise three times a week are better for improving your mood than a prescription for anti-depressants.

Reduce your risk of osteoporosis. The American Academy of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that "...all peri and postmenopausal women...engage in regular weight-bearing exercise such as walking" (and dancing!).

Live longer A moderate level of exercise cuts in half your risk of dying prematurely, according to the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas.

Beat the boredom of the treadmill. Gyms can be boring, dancing is not. You can dress up, look good, and meet new people while improving your physical health. Studies show that the more different cardio activities you engage in, the more likely you are to stay with an exercise program.

Improve your stamina, flexibility and balance. Like any other moderate, weight-bearing exercise, dancing on a regular basis can increase endurance and flexibility, improve balance, and strengthen bones.

- by Janet Novinger

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Janet Novinger has experienced the health and fun benefits of dancing in her own life during her eight years of dancing with Northwest Dance Network (formerly Living Traditions). "Dancing is the most joyful way to exercise and a great way to make friends," she said. When she's not dancing, Janet provides training, coaching and consulting to help groups and individuals develop leadership and communication skills through her consulting firm, Explorations.