

TIME

Dance Like Your Doctor Is Watching: It's Great for Your Mind and Body

By JAMIE DUCHARME December 20, 2018

Two new studies say that **dancing** may keep you healthy well into old age, potentially by reducing the risk of disability and dementia.

One paper, published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, looked at how various forms of physical activity affected about 1,000 elderly Japanese women and their risk of becoming physically disabled, as measured by their ability to complete tasks like walking, bathing and dressing. The women were asked about their general health and the types of physical activity they regularly did, and were monitored for signs of disability over eight years.

During that time, 130 women met the criteria for disability. The researchers found that physical activity generally helped women remain independent as they aged, but certain types of exercise seemed to have larger effects than others — and dancing led the pack.

The researchers found that women who frequently danced had a 73% lower chance of becoming disabled during the study period, compared to women who did not. None of the other exercises, including calisthenics, walking and yoga, had such a strong association after adjusting for demographic and health factors.

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The secret may be that dancing requires a variety of different skills, both mental and physical. “Dancing requires not only balance, strength, and endurance ability, but also cognitive ability: adaptability and concentration to move according to the music and partner, artistry for graceful and fluid motion, and memory for choreography,” the researchers write.

The second paper, published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, further examined dancing's mental health benefits. The researchers analyzed 32 past studies involving more than 3,500 people ages 50 to 85 to determine whether mind-body activities, including tai chi, yoga and dance, could improve aging adults' cognitive function.

There is no known way to definitively prevent or reverse dementia and cognitive decline. But after reviewing all the data, the researchers determined that aging adults who engaged in mind-body exercises tended to have stronger global cognition (a measure of general cognitive function) than people who did not do any.

And when the researchers refined their analysis to look at specific mind-body activities and measures of cognitive function, they found even stronger evidence that 60 to 120 minutes of tai chi or dance per week could improve global cognition, even for adults who already had some impairment. These activities also appeared to positively affect cognitive flexibility — the ability to adapt to new and changing situations — language fluency, learning, memory and organization, even more than other mind-body pursuits.

Neither study proved that dancing causes health benefits, only that it is associated with these outcomes. It's possible, for example, that physically and mentally healthy adults are simply more likely to dance than people who aren't as healthy.

Still, these studies are not the first to suggest that dancing comes with health benefits. One paper published in 2017 found through brain imaging scans that dancing can increase the amount of white matter in the brains of elderly adults. White matter degrades with age, and this breakdown is thought to be associated with cognitive decline.

Of course, dancing is also a good form of physical exercise, which plenty of research has shown to benefit mood, mental health and physical health — and it doesn't hurt that it's just great fun.

Write to Jamie Ducharme at jamie.ducharme@time.com.

