

Don't Be a Square -- Dance!

Do-Si-Do Fitness

WebMD Feature

July 9, 2001 -- "Bow to your partner, bow to your corner, circle left, alemand left ... swing and promenade home."

In squares of eight across the country, Americans from senior-citizen age on down are linking arms, sashaying, and "do-si-doing" themselves to longer, healthier, and happier lives. They're having a blast and also lowering their risk of [heart disease](#), [diabetes](#), certain types of [cancer](#), age-related memory loss, [osteoporosis](#), and [depression](#).

Good for Body and Mind

With all its moving, twisting, and turning, square dancing provides more than the daily dose of heart- and bone-healthy physical activity. Remembering all the calls -- from "do-si-do" to 'alemand' -- keeps the mind sharp, potentially staving off age-related memory loss, experts say. And the companionship that regular square dancing offers is an antidote to depression and loneliness, a statement confirmed by square-dancing advocates everywhere.

Take Larry McKinley, a 62-year-old who has been square dancing for 30-plus years with his wife, Sue -- who, incidentally, he met at a square dance. "We do it as often as we can, maybe five or six times a week," he tells WebMD.

"The listening -- and executing the commands -- takes deep concentration. The twisting and turning are not too hard on you, but give your body the exercise that it needs," he says.

McKinley's club, the London Bridge Square Dance Club of Lake Havasu, Ariz., has 80 members, and the average age of a member is 75.

"We recently graduated an 84-year-old," he says. "Graduated," in square-dancing terms, means the student has earned a Mainstream dance level.

There are four levels of square dancing, McKinley tells WebMD. There's Mainstream, then there's Plus, followed by the more professional, exhibition-levels, A-1 and A-2. McKinley is a Plus-level square dancer.

"It's very easy once you learn," he says. "Years ago, I was getting a divorce and didn't want to be a bump on a barstool." That's when he went to his first dance and got hooked.

"It's just so much fun. Square dancing is setting friendship to music," he says. "It's having a place to get up and go in the evening where you can work up a good tired and a good sweat."

'If You Can Walk, You Can Square Dance'

McKinley knows what he's talking about. Square dancing contributes to a more healthy and independent lifestyle, says Lewis Maharam, MD, a sports medicine specialist in New York City and president of the Greater New York Regional Chapter of the American College of Sports Medicine.

"Anything that keeps you active will keep you healthier and feeling younger. In most cases if you can walk, you can square dance, but it's good advice to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise regimen," says Maharam, also medical director of the Suzuki Rock 'n' Roll Marathon in San Diego, the Country Music Marathon, and the New York City Marathon.

"Any weight-bearing exercise, including square dancing, is a major benefit as one ages," he says. Weight-bearing exercise improves bone health and thus may help stave off the brittle-bone disease osteoporosis.

"Square dancing also helps you with the feeling of where you are in space and with coordination, and this may reduce falls and chances for fractures," says Maharam. "Regular square dancing may boost endurance, and being able to tolerate longer bouts of moving faster may result in improved cardiac function as the heart, a muscle, can become more efficient if trained. Square dancing can be considered a type of cross training, which helps to offset the muscle loss and strength loss typically associated with normal aging."

A Social Form of Exercise

The physical benefits of square dancing are impressive, to be sure, but don't discount the social payoff, says Jerry Reed of Coca, Fla.

"The primary benefit [of square dancing] is the social interaction between people," says Reed, executive director of CALLERLAB, the international association of square-dance callers, with 2,000 members worldwide.

"Most of the activities that people do these days are individual, such as golfing, tennis, and bowling," he says. "Square dancing is kind of unique in that it involves touching hands -- we turn, we swing, and that seems to bring us closer together."

And the touching in itself can be beneficial to health, according to studies conducted at the Touch Research Institute in Miami, which showed that regular touching can reduce stress and depression and enhance immune system function.

What to Expect

"A typical evening is about two hours long and in that time we dance six 'tips,' " Reed says.

A tip includes a "hash calling" -- where the caller calls out some moves, which the dancers execute in smooth, choreographed routines -- and a "singing call," which can include all types of square-dance moves timed to fit popular songs. On any given evening, dancers will twirl across the floor to the music of John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Road," the Bee Gee's "Stayin' Alive," Donna Summer's "She Works Hard for the Money," as well as songs by the Beatles and Elvis Presley.

Reed calls about four dances a week. Today's square dancing is hipper than what most people see in movies, he says, and more therapeutic than you might think.

"It takes your mind off of the day-to-day problems," he says. "All those other worries and thoughts disappear when you are dancing."

Ready to Sashay Your Way to Fitness?

You say you're tempted, but not sure if you've got what it takes? Don't underestimate yourself, says Reed.

"Square dancing is not as complex as it looks, he says. "We just learn one move at a time and go from there."

So what's stopping you from joining in all the fun? Square dance clubs are popping up all across the world, and they want you. Ask at your local community center or check your local Yellow Pages for information on square dancing clubs and events in your neighborhood.

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