

Ballroom Dancing

Is ballroom dancing good for everyone?

For the majority of people who love to dance, ballroom dancing is one of the best exercises for cardiovascular fitness. Only those with medical or physical impairment that disable them to dance will not benefit from it. While walking on the treadmill or doing rowing exercises makes one feel he/she is engaging in a boring “forced labor,” dancing provides the exercise with much more fun and social enjoyment that one even loses, not only calories, but track of time. Without being flippant, sometimes ballroom dancing could even be better for our body than sex. But only sometimes.

Who should not indulge in ballroom dancing?

Anyone with physical disability or medical condition (heart disease, untreated or uncontrolled high blood pressure, severe emphysema, dizziness, etc) that would make one severely short of breath, and/ or have chest pains, or simply feeling not well, after a couple of minutes of physical activities, should not indulge in ballroom dancing. The most prudent to do, if you have an illness or if have any doubt, is to have a good medical checkup and clearance by your physician before going ballroom dancing.

Can ballroom dancing cause any injuries?

Obviously, yes, like any other physical activities that tax our feet, bones, joints, ligaments, tendons and muscles and nerves. However, with an intelligent and a common sense approach to exercise, one can prevent or minimize unnecessary injuries that sometimes happen. The more conditioned one is, the less prone to injuries the person becomes, and the more enjoyment he/she derives from ballroom dancing.

Have there been deaths from dancing?

Yes, I was a witness to one myself at a dinner-dance at the Chicago Hilton a few years ago. These incidents are rare but they do happen. Most of those victims would have died from any other form of strenuous physical activity, like heavy lifting, sex, climbing long flights of stairs, etc., or even after eating a heavy meal. These people are usually 50 years or older, with undetected heart disease, or with previous neglected chest pains, and are thus prone to succumb to a heart attack. We really ought to listen more to what our body tells us and heed its message no matter how subtle it may be.

How about deaths among the younger people?

Occasionally, we hear of sudden deaths in persons younger than 50, even among teenagers, following sports or other rigorous physical activities. These are usually due to cardiac arrhythmias, where the heart suddenly develops a fatal irregularity and cardiac arrest follows. Many of these do not even show any evident pathology (abnormality) on autopsies.

What causes these sudden deaths in the young?

Sudden deaths in the young, who were “otherwise healthy”, and where autopsies did not show any pathology, could have been due to electrolyte imbalance, low potassium and/or sodium level (like those on extreme dieting regimen), dehydration, effects of caffeine (coffee, chocolate, cola drinks), diet pills or illegal drugs, or undiagnosed heart disease. Fatal arrhythmias could be induced by any of these.

How much calories does one lose doing ballroom dancing?

Energy dissipated or calories lost during any physical activity is a function of time, how much one weighs, how vigorous one performs the activity, and the environmental temperature. Medical research shows that, on the average situations, one loses about 200 calories doing fast dancing (for instance the Swing or Boogie) nonstop for 30 minutes. Medium aerobics for half an hour burn about 197.4 calories. Walking (4 mph) for half an hour consumes about 155 calories. Foreplay in sex for 15 minutes, burns about 22.5 calories and actual sexual intercourse for 15 minutes, 67.5 calories (a total of 90 calories for the entire activity). And one feels thousands of calories are burned following 30 minutes of sex! One could, of course, do it more often, but, for total cardiovascular fitness, one should have a regular regimen (at least 3 times a week) of aerobics and/or walking and/or ballroom dancing.

Is ballroom dancing better than jogging?

Yes, most definitely. In the 60s and early 80s, the experts recommended jogging as “the best exercise for cardiovascular fitness.” Following enough experience in this form of activity, which showed attendant injuries to bones, joints, etc. in the feet, legs and hips and spine, the experts changed to a new recommendation: ambulation, the simple, unadulterated old-fashioned exercise, walking, the benefits of which were well known to our parents, grand parents and even to our great grandparents. Common sense dictates this, and yet we had to go through extensive medical studies to find out and convince ourselves about something that was obvious. Jogging (5.5 mph) for 30 minutes burns 294 calories.

So, is jogging now condemned?

No, it is not. Those athletic type persons can still benefit from, and enjoy, jogging, because their body is conditioned to take the insults of jogging. But for the majority of us, slow walking to fast walking, and/or ballroom dancing to slow music to a fast tempo, depending on each individual tolerance and capability, is the recommended exercise. One gets the same cardiovascular (fitness) benefit from regular (at least 3 times a week) walking and/or ballroom dancing, with less injuries, and with the added extra bonus of better mental and social health. It will also be cheaper in the end, sans extra expenses for medical care for the potential jogging injuries.

Is there an age limit for people to do ballroom dancing?

No. The oldest couple I know are 76 and 78 years old, on whom I had implanted a pacemaker on the wife and did coronary bypass on the husband, about ten years earlier. They are still actively doing ballroom dancing, using it as “our cardiac rehabilitation exercise.” Age is, indeed, a matter of mind and not of time. As long as one is feeling well and able to do activities, like ballroom dancing or fast walking, and has no medical contraindication, one should continue to do so, not only for physical (cardiovascular) fitness but also for, more importantly, social and mental health.

Our readers are invited to send in their medical questions for possible inclusion in future issues of this column. Mail your questions to the author at Heart to Heart Talk, c/o Cebu Cardiovascular Center, Cebu Doctors' Hospital, Osmena Boulevard, Cebu City, Philippines, or e-mail them to heart@chua.net

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