

# Trip the light fantastic

*Dancing isn't just en vogue, it's also great exercise.*

**B**OPPY POP SONGS, A FUN GROUP OF FRIENDS and a good sweaty workout. There's a lot for Ester Jarosz to look forward to at her weekly tap dancing class. "I've just always loved to dance," says the 41-year-old Torontonian, who has type 1 diabetes. So when a group of fellow moms invited her to join them at a local dance school nine months ago, she jumped at the chance to try her first formal dance lessons. "It's an excellent mix of physical and mental exercise," says Jarosz, referring to the muscle coordination and memory work required. She admits it took several lessons for things to begin to "click." But one proud day, it all came together when she was able to tap an entire routine without stopping.

All types of dancing – tap, ballet, jazz, hip hop, ballroom and belly dancing, for example – are offered at YMCA/YWCAs, community centres and private dance schools across the country. And the calorie-burning, energizing, full-body workout makes dance an activity that health professionals are keen to promote to just about anyone interested in getting fit.

"Dancing is a fantastic exercise choice for people with diabetes because it involves large body movements and is a rhythmic activity that increases your heart rate," says Drew Harvey, an exercise physiologist and contract professor at the University of Waterloo and Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont.

Aerobic activities, such as dance, walking, swimming and cycling, help all individuals – with or without diabetes – reduce their risk of cardiovascular disease, lower their blood pressure and cholesterol, and increase their physical strength, says Harvey. On a practical level, those who make time for an exercise program find they can do everyday activities such as gardening, golfing, and lifting small children with less effort. "Exercisers feel better about themselves physically and mentally, and have greater self-esteem and an improved quality of life," says Harvey.

For people with type 2 diabetes, the news is even better: Studies reveal that aerobic exercise lowers blood glucose levels and increases insulin sensitivity.

The Canadian Diabetes Association's clinical practice guidelines recommend that individuals with type 2 diabetes aim for 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise three days per week, divided into three separate sessions. Harvey suggests a gentle approach is best for beginners who haven't exercised before. "Start with just 10 minutes and build slowly," he advises, noting that it's easy to push too hard and then become discouraged. "Whatever activity you choose, aim for an intensity similar to that of a brisk walk."

The trick to sticking with an exercise program is finding something you really enjoy, says Dr. Deborah Vossen, a professor in the department of human kinetics at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. "If you love it, you'll crave it, and you won't have to force yourself to do it simply because it's good for you," explains Vossen, a former fitness club owner. Dance can be an especially good choice, she says, because music is a powerful motivator and the repeated patterns and routines help keep you moving.

Learning a new skill can be challenging, notes Vossen, recalling her own experience in an adult jazz dance class. But if you feel like you have two left feet at your first class, don't give up, she says. "Give it a chance. You can't expect to get all the moves at the first class. Make your objective broad, and aim to simply keep moving and have fun." ■

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## Dance your way to health

- Consult with your physician or certified diabetes educator to be sure the dance class you're considering is appropriate for you.
- Check community centres, dance schools and the YMCA/YWCA to find a dance class with like-minded people who are of a similar age and fitness level.
- Get to know other participants. Social connections help many people attend more regularly and can make the experience more enjoyable.
- If participating in a group sounds daunting, whirl around the living room with a favourite CD or a learn-to-dance DVD. Start with just 10 minutes; gradually lengthen your dance time, and then graduate to a class when you feel ready.

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## Dance at home

Pull on some comfortable clothes and supportive shoes, and dance up a storm with one of these classic dance DVDs. Turn on a fan to stay cool, and have a glass of water nearby.

### Dancing with the Stars Cardio Dance

Learn the cha cha, samba, jive and *paso doble* with dancers from the hit television show *Dancing with the Stars*. This 60-minute, beginner/intermediate level DVD features great music and enthusiastic instructors. No partner required!

### Discover Bellydance

Bellydance stars and sisters Veena and Neena make it fun to learn a graceful, flowing, choreographed sequence that includes rib circles, travelling steps and full turns.

### Denise Austin's Fat Burning Dance Mix

This easy-to-follow, beginner/intermediate DVD teaches four 10-minute dances – jazz, Latin, club funk and ballet toning – that are basic to slightly more complex.

### Richard Simmons' Party Off the Pounds

Simmons' legendary enthusiasm takes you through fun dance routines that include basic steps like grapevines, marches and step touches set to hit songs from the '80s like "True Colors," "Shake It Up" and "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." Also included is a free-form ("just move to the music") segment, safety tips and exertion-level reminders.