

TAKING CLASSES

If you don't seem flexible enough for a particular move, don't give yourself a hard time. It may not be lack of practice. The shape of your bones and other structural differences, can affect your range of motions.

Muscles do not turn to fat when you stop exercising. What actually happens, is the strength of the muscle reduces and it feels softer. Muscles and fat are completely different tissues.

If you injure a muscle, tendon or joint, treat it by resting, applying an ice pack, compressing (applying a bandage or support) and elevating the affected area - remember this routine using the initials RICE.

No pain, no gain is a bit drastic - muscular endurance can be increased with light resistance repetitions and as a general rule, when you start to feel a burning sensation in your muscles, try 5 more repetitions.

Most people know that you shouldn't eat immediately before a class, but they don't know that this is because during exercise, the blood supply to inactive areas, like the digestive system, is reduced to supply more blood to the muscle. If you have eaten, blood flow to the digestive system is increased, depriving the muscles of an essential blood supply.

It's often best to do class in close fitting clothes so your teacher can see whether the right muscle groups are working. With loose clothes, it may look right superficially, but the underlying movement itself may be quite wrong.

Having a cold can affect your balance, as the ear canals may become infected. This means that the feedback of information on position and balance to the nervous system can become distorted.

If you don't like performing under blinding lights because you can't see what you're doing, practise with your eyes closed. This strengthens your understanding and reliance on the receptors in your skin, which is sensitive to pressure and send messages telling the brain where the body weight is placed.

As much as possible, relax and allow your natural reflexes to work because when you think too much, you can start to build up stress and tension.

If you rehearse or perform in trainers, always wear 100% cotton socks to prevent blisters, fungal infections and other nasties.

Just because you look thin, doesn't mean that you're healthy. Snack based, high fat diets produce under developed muscles which leave space for a substantial layer of fat on a seemingly thin body.

Treat your body as an athlete's by eating 4 to 6 small meals a day and combining all the right food groups to give the energy you need.

The simple truth is that most dance disciplines never stop hurting. For example, pointe work might hurt when you start learning but it won't stop hurting when you're a professional. It might hurt

less, but in performance or training, a dancer is always striving to better, so you will keep pushing your body to the limit, though those limits might change.

Especially in modern or contemporary dance, there is a lot of physical contact, with lifting, turning and rolling. This makes personal hygiene especially important. Dance kits (and bodies) should be washed every time you wear (use) them.

It can be hard doing very intimate work with someone you barely know and as difficult, if you do know the person. You have to learn to think of them as a body, and a part of the dance, rather than a person.

Instead of simply copying the instructor, try to understand the link between the mind and the body as this can improve co-ordination. Use feelings to accompany body movement, for example, imagine the feeling of trying to avoid 100s of pins on the floor and move accordingly. Or try visual imagery - drawing a picture in your mind of the space or shape your body needs to move within.

If you have trouble learning a step, walk it through in your mind over and over after class. Even if you get back to class and you still get it wrong, you've got a context for putting it right.

Use your kitchen or any space, to practise. Even if you can't get the steps right on your own, the process of practising and being used to moving, still improves your dancing.

Always have a count in your head, relating to the beat of the music. To learn a step, weave into the count, a reminder of the step you should be doing on each beat; one, two, forward, side' etc

Always think about your stomach muscles. Hold them straight and you will look alert and poised without looking rigid. Make sure, you can still breathe.

The myth, that unless the man is taller, a couple can't dance well together, is untrue. If both dance well, you will both look good.

To hold yourself straight while turning, feel your body as a column above the foot you're turning on.

It actually takes very little energy to spin on one foot. If you put too much energy behind it, you can lose your balance. In partner work, use your partner's energy when they push you into a turn.

Quotes and extracts from Lucy Pankhurst, Sarah Cramer, Jane Hodgkin, Don McAlpine.

NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

Refuelling after exercise is vital for maintaining energy levels. Straight after exercise take carbohydrate rich foods as soon as possible to maximise glycogen (muscle carbohydrate) stores. Aim for 50 g carbs in the first hour after performance. If possible include some protein too, milk drinks/yoghurt are good.

Keep drinking, stay hydrated. Sweat losses can be a litre or more every hour, especially in hot climates. Avoid very sweet drinks before and during performances; the sugar is absorbed before the fluid can be absorbed. Keep to sport drinks or other diluted fluids/water.

Take high carbohydrate snacks with you and eat regularly. Aim to eat a meal or substantial snack 2 - 4 hours before performing. Avoid high fat foods as these take much longer to be digested. Base all meals and snacks on carbohydrates to help maintain energy levels.

Keep your meals balanced. Looking at a main meal, around 1/3 carbohydrate, a little less than a third protein plus plenty of fruit and vegetables. Aim to include protein rich foods 2 - 3 times daily.

If you're a vegetarian or not keen on fish or meat, replace with an other source of protein such as eggs, cheese, Quorn, beans or lentils, tofu or other soya product.

Vitamin supplements aren't necessary if you have a balanced diet but a good multi-vitamin can act as an 'insurance policy'.

Tiredness can be caused by lack of fluid and/or food as well as by exercise or lack of sleep. Focus on what your body really needs.

...In the instinctive psyche, the body is considered a sensor, an informational network, a messenger with myriad communication systems - cardiovascular, respiratory, skeletal, autonomic, as well as emotive and intuitive. In the imaginal world, the body is a powerful vehicle, a spirit who lives with us, a prayer of life in its own right. In fairy tales, as personified by magical objects that have superhuman qualities and abilities, the body is considered to have two sets of ears, one for hearing in the mundane world, the other for hearing the soul; two sets of eyes, one set for regular vision, another for far-seeing; two kinds of strength, the strength of the muscles and the invincible strength of the soul. The list of twos about the body goes on.

In systems of body work such as Feldenkrais method, Ayurveda, and others, the body is understood variously as having six senses, not five. The body uses its skin and deeper fascia and flesh to record all that goes on around it. Like the Rosetta stone, for those who know how to read it, the body is a living record of life given, life taken, life hoped for, life healed. It is valued for its articulate ability to register immediate reaction, to feel profoundly, to sense ahead.

The body is a multilingual being. It speaks through its true colour and its temperature, the flush of recognition, the glow of love, the ash of pain, the heat of arousal, the coldness of nonconviction. It speaks through its constant tiny dance, sometimes swaying, sometimes a-jitter, sometimes trembling. It speaks through the leaping of the heart, the falling of the spirit, the pit at the center, and rising hope.

The body remembers, the bones remember, the joints remember, even the little finger remembers. Memory is lodged in pictures and feelings in the cells themselves. Like a sponge filled with water, anywhere the flesh is pressed, wrung, even touched lightly, a memory may flow out in a stream.

To confine the beauty and value of the body to anything less than this magnificence is to force the body to live without its rightful spirit, its rightful form, its right to exultation. To be thought ugly or unacceptable because one's beauty is outside the current fashion is deeply wounding to natural joy.....

Clarissa Pinkola Estes; 'Women who run with Wolves' 1995