

Physical Preparation

Dance class can be physically challenging. During class you practice dancing safely to prevent dance injuries, but sometimes injuries do occur. Preparing your body for class with warm-ups and using proper technique during class are essential to injury prevention and therefore dance safety. Cooling down returns your body to normal from the exertion of dancing and gives you time to stretch your muscles. Both warm-ups and cool-downs safely prepare you for the next time you dance.

Warming Up and Cooling Down

Dancers warm up before dance class, rehearsal, or performance. The purpose of warming up is to raise the core temperature of the body and its parts through a series of exercises that prepare you to move. Warm-ups are a series of exercises that elevate the heart rate and include gentle overall body stretching to prevent strain or injury in the major muscle groups. Cooling down is a series of exercises done after dance class, rehearsal, or performance. The purpose of cooling down is to slow down the heart rate from dancing and stretch to prevent stiffness.

The dance class warm-up and cool-down can be general, or they can contain specific components. General exercises support all dancers in a dance class, but you may choose some specific ones to meet your body's needs. Exercises related to a particular dance genre prepare your body for specific classes, rehearsals, or performances.

Warm-up formats vary depending on the class and the amount of class time. Some warm-ups begin with increasing the heart rate through movements travelling around the dance space, while other warm-ups focus on gentle stretching movements of body parts to warm up the entire body. A warm-up can be a separate section that begins the class, or the warm-up exercises can blend together with executing dance movements and exercises, too.

Cool-downs may be part of the end of dance class or personal time after class. Cool-down exercises contribute to slowing down your heart rate and include stretching and personal reviewing of movements, steps, or combinations to help you remember how to correctly perform them.

In a beginning dance class, warm-ups and cool-downs are teacher led to help you learn them as part of the dance class. Later you can develop personal warm-ups and cool-downs for practice during other times before and after dancing.

Stretching

When you stretch before class or after class, you need to use proper body position to stretch the correct muscles, and you need to know how much to stretch. If you just stretch without paying attention to body position, you may not achieve your goal and could increase your potential for injury. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends flexibility training a minimum of 2 or 3 days per week, holding each stretch for 10 to 30 seconds to mild discomfort; 3 or 4 repetitions per stretch.

Another factor depends upon where you are in the flexibility range. If you are very flexible, then stretching does not have the importance to extend your range of motion that it does for a person who has little flexibility. Rather for the flexible person, the goal is maintenance of flexibility and acquiring strength to support it. For example, these two components will support your leg extension while giving you the core muscles to use in a leap or a huge jump.

Mental Preparation

As with any other course in school, in dance class you process a lot of information, so you need to clear your mind. Preparing your mind is just as important as preparing your body for dance. Mental preparation includes putting away thoughts about the previous class you attended, your daily to-do list, and any social or personal issues that claim your attention. Mental preparation allows you to focus on learning and enjoying the experiences you will have in dance class.

Stress is part of everyday life, which often includes demanding situations. Negative stressors are causes for *distress*, while positive stressors can lead to *eustress*. Eustress is a heightened sense of excitement you can get from demanding but positive situations such as participating in adventure activities, the arts, and dance. Negative stressors can be physical, emotional, social, or environmental, such as a difficult break-up, not getting enough rest, or being sick. Deep breathing, relaxation exercises, regular physical activity, and laughter are some ways to cope with distress. Specific stress reduction exercises are included on the web resource for this chapter under the heading Additional Resources for Students.