

News Releases

Dancers reel their way to fitness

Scottish country dancing has extensive and measurable fitness benefits for older people, according to research at Strathclyde.



A study has found that dancers aged from 60 to 85 years who perform Strathspeys, jigs and reels are more agile, have stronger legs and can walk more briskly than people of the same age who take part in other forms of exercise.

The comparison between two groups who were active in different types of exercise suggested that country dancing had particular value in keeping people fit.

Dr Paul Dougall, a Senior Lecturer and expert in dance and drama at Strathclyde, led the research. He said: "It's generally assumed that dancing is good exercise but we wanted to measure whether Scottish country dancing has specific health benefits.

"We chose to study this particular type of dancing partly because it is very popular with older people in Scotland but also because it has steps which have to be followed precisely. This calls for a particular level of physical fitness and mental alertness and the dancers who took part in the study were experienced- they have all been dancing for at least five years, some for 30 years and more.

"Not only is country dancing enjoyable and sociable but there also appears to be clear evidence that it's an effective recreational exercise for particular types of fitness later in life."

The study focused on older women, reflecting their greater susceptibility to conditions such as osteoporosis. It had 70 participants- 35 women aged between 60 and 85 years who practised Scottish country dancing and another 35 in the same age range who took part in other forms of exercise such as swimming, walking, golf and keep-fit classes.

The women were all invited to take part in three-hour fitness assessment sessions, in groups of four, to monitor their strength, stamina, flexibility and balance. They were then compared with average fitness levels for women of their age- all 70 compared favourably with the averages but those who danced had better levels of fitness in some or all of the areas assessed than those who did not.

The target group of dancers was put together with the assistance of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

The project also involved Dr Susan Dewhurst, an Exercise Physiologist from the Strathclyde Institute of Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences, who led assessments of the participants' fitness.



She said: "We used state of the art equipment to give very precise measurements of muscle quality and function. By studying participants of various ages, and by using a research team with an extensive range of experience, we were able to build a comprehensive picture of the considerable health benefits of Scottish country dancing."

Irene Harper, a participant in the study, has been practising Scottish country dancing for nearly 60 years and teaching it for more than 40 years. She said: "Scottish country dancing is not only good for the cardiovascular system- it helps to keep the mind active and retain healthy bones.

"It's an excellent form of exercise which brings men, women and children together socially, learning new and old dances in a very friendly relaxed atmosphere, creating a community spirit."

The study forms part of the Dance for Life programme, a series of projects aimed at understanding the value of health through exercise for people of all ages.

The Strathclyde Institute of Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences is a pioneering centre for developing new medicines for illnesses and conditions including infectious diseases, cancer, heart disease, and arthritis. An £8 million [fundraising campaign](#) is underway for the Institute's new £36 million building, to expand and enhance its innovative research and education in medicine discovery, development and use.

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