

Avoiding Dance Injuries 101

by Diana Clanin, Director of Dancing Well

There are few things more frustrating to a dancer than sitting on the sidelines injured, not to mention that injury is the number one cause of career termination! Of the two basic categories of injury, trauma, (like when your partner drops you on your head or you sprain an ankle), and overuse (cumulative sub-threshold stress resulting in tendonitis, stress fractures and inflammations), it is the overuse and chronic injuries that plague us most frequently.

The good news is that with appropriate prevention, most injuries are definitely avoidable. The bad news is that the dance world in general seems to either ignore or refute the obvious safeguards that would deter such occurrences, espousing instead the contention that pain is inevitable and dance careers are short-lived and only for the young. Talk about denial!

Dance is an inherently dangerous activity: we are asking the body to quite simply do things it was not designed to do. Externally rotating from the hip--turn out--is not how we were meant to walk, much less run, jump, or leap. Neither is lifting our legs ballistically past our ears or behind our backs at a 120° degree angle. Some aches and pains are bound to manifest. Additionally, as dance technique evolves, contemporary choreography is pushing these natural limitations further and further. It would be naïve to think this evolution would cease: dance will no doubt become increasingly acrobatic and extreme. While ultimately it is up to you to protect your body; most injurious patterns occur in the early stages of training when a dancer is too young to know the difference between good and bad teaching. Most parents are of course equally uneducated, but by the time a dancer reaches intermediate levels, the damage is often already set into motion.

Recently I worked with an advanced dancer who was 17 years old, ready to embark on a round of auditions in search of her first job with a ballet company. Unfortunately she was suffering from chronic ankle tendonitis and “shin splints.” After an orthopedic exam, I observed her in class. Within minutes, the problem was obvious: she was pointing her foot with a mal-alignment of her ankle. It was subtle, but had never--in all her years of several classes per day, all her professional teachers, all her summer intensives at eminent programs across the country--ever been corrected. This mal-alignment was repeated each time she used a pointed foot, at least a billion times a class. And now, when she needs to be in top form, her symptoms are worsening and she’s wondering how she can compete or perform.

All the ibuprophen or physical therapy in the world will not correct for bad technique. Your best defense is to study with a good teacher, which, alas, is easier said than done. It is erroneously assumed that if someone was a stellar or noted performer that they are a good instructor. This is absolutely NOT true! They may be fabulous coaches and able to pass on historically valuable choreography and style, and many have a natural eye for form, but they often know nothing about teaching young or adolescent bodies. Since they are themselves inherently talented, movements come to them more naturally and they often do not understand how to break steps down for less advanced or less talented dancers, or how to set technique on a less-than-perfect body. Your best bet is to find a teacher with knowledge of anatomy, kinesiology, and an unerring emphasis on correct alignment and placement. A good teacher will not just tell or show you what

to do, they will help you understand HOW to do it with YOUR body, carefully and progressively. For more information you can contact Diana Clanin at 303-919-5907, dancingwell@earthlink.net.