

# Tap dance for fitness!

## Getting fit through tap dancing

Tap dance is a lively and entertaining activity that transforms the dancer from a mere performer into a fully-fledged percussive instrument. Taking its name from the tapping sound created by dancers' feet, it's a style that has taken the western world by storm with the number of tap dance clubs and competitions growing rapidly. As a result, here's the real buzz guide on how tap dancing could be the exercise to get you on the road towards health and fitness success...

An introduction to tap dancing Modern-day tap has evolved from a number of different sources to become one of the most distinctive dancing styles in the world today. Although an American theatrical dance, tap originated from 17th Century clog dances in northern England, African foot stamping, and traditional Gaelic jigs.

Tap is as much about creating sound as it is physical performance. The rhythmic tapping noise made by the metal plates of dancers' shoes is meant to chime with syncopated choreography and improvisation. Tap dancers may perform to music, or simply dance acapella, using nothing but the steady beat of their feet as a rhythm to follow.

After being adopted by a number of early US musicals, tap dance has grown significantly in popularity and is now enjoyed by a wealth of performers across the globe.

Key fitness benefits of tap dancing Tap dancing has many key health and fitness benefits, in addition to those already associated with dance exercise. Benefits of tap dance include the following:

- **Boosting cardiovascular performance** - If performed at a high intensity for 15-30 minutes, tap dancing offers great exercise for the cardiovascular system, working out the heart and lungs so they function more efficiently. Strong CV performance is vital to ensure that muscles are supplied with a steady flow of oxygen. Tap dance provides a great way of developing this system.
- **Toning the leg muscles through tap dance** - If your legs currently resemble trembling slithers of jelly, wobbling at the slightest hint of movement, it might be an idea to get into tap dancing. Tap offers a great way of toning your lower-body muscles by optimising the thighs and quads. Feeling frumpy? Time to get tapping...
- **Reducing the risk of high blood pressure** - If you suffer from sky-high blood pressure, tap dancing could offer an effective way of bringing it back down to earth. Tap dancing gets blood flowing around all the body's major muscle groups, causing arteries to dilate and contract more effectively. So try it out today and you could soon be feeling in tip-tap condition.
- **Fighting fat through tap dance** - If you've been trundling on a treadmill for what feels like an eternity, maybe it's time to try something new. Tap dancing is a surprisingly effective activity if you want to bum calories quickly. Depending on the intensity of your tap workout, anywhere between three and four hundred calories can be burnt off. So here's a top tip: try tap.

Key styles of tap dancing Although tap dancing has grown from a number of disparate sources, modern-day tap is made up of a variety of key steps. These include the following moves...

- **Walk step** - The most basic tap move and the earliest beginners will master. It simply involves stepping normally across the dance floor, in time to the rhythm of the music.

- Step-heel- Slightly more advanced than the walk step, this move sees the dancer step so that the ball of their foot comes down first, just before the heel. This way, two distinct sounds are created.
- The stamp - Here, the dancer puts his or her foot down sharply, with both the ball of the foot and the heel loudly hitting the ground at the same time to create one big tap.
- The brush - In this step, the dancer swings his or her leg forwards and backwards, with the ball of the foot brushing the floor during the sweep.
- Cramp-roll - A more complex move, the cramp-roll sees the dancer jump into the air and then land on the ball of one foot, before bringing down the ball of the other foot and then one heel after the other. This should occur in a steady rhythm.

What to expect from your first tap dancing class Tap dance does require some investment before you book a place in a class. Buying a good pair of tap dancing shoes is vital to ensure that you don't do any damage to your feet, so make sure you shop around before committing yourself.

Beginner tap classes are friendly affairs, with welcoming teachers able to deal with your initial fears and misgivings. They'll only push you as hard as you want to go, so don't worry about being left dazed and confused.

Key tap dancing tips and more information Whilst tap dancing may appear to place a great deal of stress on the toes and feet, it's important to remember that these areas will be well-supported with a good quality pair of tap shoes. As long as you perform with care and use the right shoes, tap is as safe as any other form of dance. Horror stories about tap injuries largely derive from people not taking adequate precautions, or trying out ambitious steps before they can even master the basics. Don't be one of these people! Instead, take your time over tap and you'll be an expert soon enough.

## “Tapping for Exercise” (Article in The Times)

If you've ever tried tap dancing, you'll know how hard it is to pull off. I tried it once, aged 10. Armed with ugly, hand-me-down (but thrillingly noisy) metal-plated shoes, I attended my first class ready to show off - and it was a stomping disaster.

So, to conquer my childhood nightmare, and half-inspired by the all-singing, all-dancing TV phenomenon Glee - in tonight's episode the cast perform a Singin' in the Rain routine with (inexplicably) Gwyneth Paltrow - I decided to try tap again.

You don't have to be pre-adolescent to unleash your inner foot-tapper - in fact, the older you are, the better. "Tap is a form of dance that one can take into old age," says Heather Rees, fellow at the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, and author of Tap Dancing: Rhythm In Their Feet. "Most of the old masters have continued to dance well into their seventies."

As an exercise, tap is strengthening for feet, ankles and thighs, and good for improving balance. For older beginners, tap can also help retain mobility. It is, however, important to - excuse the pun - take it one step at a time. "Beginners should build up strength gradually and older people in particular should work sensibly within own limitations," says Heather.

Inspired, I went along to an adult beginner class at Dance Attic in west London, and was struck by the varied backgrounds of the students and their differing reasons for wanting to learn. Rachel, a fellow newcomer, told me: "I wanted to fulfil my ambition that I'd had since I was a child, but without the snideyness of little girls' dance schools." "I get a lot of adult learners who did tap as a child and then gave up, but always kept a fond memory of it," said Chris Ernest, tap dance teacher at Dance Attic. "And then there are those who have always had a love for it but never built up the courage to take lessons. Increasingly, people see it as a way of combining a hidden passion with keeping fit. It's moved away from top hats and tails." What keeps people coming back, however, is simpler: tap is noisy, energetic and fun.

After a simple warm-up of "step-tap" sequences, Chris took us through basic steps increasing in difficulty. First, there was the classic shuffle, backbone of Broadway-style tap, and then a more challenging shuffle-ball change, in which the shuffle is followed by a step onto the other foot. These steps were repeated over and over again, so even the most inexperienced beginner feels as if they're tapping away in no time,

One surprise was the mental exertion required. I found that my feet could do the steps but my poor brain wouldn't always follow. As Heather says: "Tap is an excellent way to learn rhythm and timing. It's like the percussion section of an orchestra."

Eventually, with my heart pounding and my head spinning, we moved on to some travelling step3 - used by performers to glide around a stage. Once we got to the "time step", I didn't want to stop. There is nothing quite as satisfying as getting a tap sequence right, down to the last beat of the music.