

Recovery

As a performer, it is essential to take care of your body on and off the stage – especially after a performance.

You might want to skip the cool-down process but make sure that you're following a proper recovery routine to help your body heal and regain strength.

In fact, without proper recovery, your body will operate at only a fraction of your full capacity, which can also lead to:

Injuries
Fatigue
Inappropriate warm-up/cool down
Mental cloudiness
Difficulty focusing

Now is the time to take control of your recovery routine and unleash your full capability. Not only will you feel better, but it will also help you improve your skills in the long run.

Besides stretching and staying hydrated, there are a few more useful tips to help your recovery.

Rinse-Off

Studies suggest that a cold rinse off should range from 10-15 degrees. Showering after your workout simply washes out bacteria build-up and sweat.

Take cold water baths to help minimize inflammation, boost recovery, and aid in pain relief. It will help your muscles and joints relax as well as encourage blood flow.

Just be sure to wash with natural ingredients and sulfate-free products that won't dry out your skin and scalp.

Ice Your Body

Sure, it might sound unappealing and even a bit of a hassle.

However, icing your body will do wonders for your post-dance recovery.

All it takes is 10 minutes for a decent ice session.

• Homemade ice pack

You can fill a plastic bottle with water and freeze it. Then place the container in a cooler and take it with you to practice.

After your performance, remove the ice out of the bottle and mould it around your muscles.

Relax Your Mind

After stretching, bathing, and icing your body – give your mind at least 20 minutes to review your performance mentally.

You can do this as you stretch to unwind and mentally decompress. Analyze your performance and think about the positives and the negatives of how well you did and what you need to improve upon. Remember to stay positive and use this time to boost confidence and constructive criticism.

Never underestimate the power of recovery. While these tips may be simple and obvious, those small habits will lead to powerful results. Always remember to create your post-performance routine with a focus on mental recovery, nutrition, and injury prevention in mind.

Give It a Rest

But lying on the couch is wasted time, you might say. Think again!

"When you work hard in class or rehearsal, micro-tears form in the fibres of your muscles," says Michelle Rodriguez, an NYC-based physical therapist who specializes in helping dancers. Sounds scary, but these tiny, tiny tears are what allow your muscles to hypertrophy—i.e., grow—which makes you stronger. You have to give your muscles periodic time off so they can do this repairing and rebuilding.

A weekly rest day is even more essential if you're still growing or under 15. "Growth plates are the part of your bone that lengthen to make you taller," says Dr Selina Shah, a sports and performing arts medicine specialist and the physician for San Francisco Ballet School and Diablo Ballet. "Time off without the stress of impact allows for normal growth without injuring those growth plates." Even if you're done growing, regular days off help prevent stress fractures and other overuse injuries.

The Rest of the Best

What does a healthy rest-and-recovery regimen look like? Getting eight hours of uninterrupted, high-quality sleep—more like 9 or 10 if you're training intensely or still growing—is also crucial. I highly recommend stretching, massaging, foam rolling, and wearing thigh-high compression socks during downtime to help hardworking muscles bounce back more quickly.

Oh, and the bathtub should be your BFF. Muscles contract and relax because of the opening and closing of sodium and calcium channels. When you're going hard, these electrolyte supplies can be depleted. When you lie in a bath containing Epsom salts or magnesium, your skin absorbs some of those minerals.

What to Do When You Literally Can't Even...

...take a rest day, that is. The reality of life as a serious performer is that you won't always—or even usually!—be able to control your training and performance schedule. That just means it's your responsibility to use the recovery time you do have to your advantage. On a quick break between rehearsals?

Don't spend it standing up, sit down, eat a snack, then lie down and put your legs up on the wall. Even brief periods of true rest make a huge difference in recovering daily.

Unlike most athletes, performers and dancers are in season all year. Look at your career as a marathon, not a sprint. You don't want to burn out because you've done too much.

The next time you have a week off between an out-of-town intensive and the start of classes at your home studio, don't be afraid to spend that time relaxing. Or do as Shah suggests: "Try a sport you don't have time for during the program, just to allow your muscles to work differently." Your body—and your dancing—will thank you.

We get it: Dancing and performing are exhausting, and sometimes all you want to do during a quick break between rehearsals is, well, nothing. Bill Evans, director of the Evans Somatic Dance Institute, recommends the following options, which are both relaxing and recuperative for the stresses dance puts on your body. From energizing restorative poses to deep breathing, here are five ways to make your downtime work for you.

Recovery Nutrition Tips

Even with long days, do your best to eat within one hour after exercise. This will help you refill glycogen storage tank for the next day. Glycogen is an important storage form of energy in your muscles and liver that dancers use for quick fuel for short burst combinations (like petite allegro). Post-exercise, there is this window of time in which glycogen stores are more easily filled by eating a nice mix of carbohydrates, protein and healthy fats from foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and whole grains.

Carbohydrates are your energy foods. So don't fear to get some oatmeal, rice, quinoa or fruit, for example.

Get protein after dancing to rebuild muscle tissue. Ideally, it helps to get protein from sources that don't contribute to increased inflammation. Harvard School of Public Health is one of the many organizations trying to raise awareness that red meat, bacon, sausage, hot dogs and other processed meats are pro-inflammatory.

1. Better alternatives that still provide protein would be nuts, beans, peas, lentils, seeds, soy and cold-water fish like salmon. Healthy fats are essential to the nervous system, brain and the structure of every cell in your body, but be careful of following this new high-fat diet/low-carb trend that vilifies carbohydrates. Every study done on athletes consuming these fad high-fat diets show what we already knew: performance is impaired. Healthy examples of fat would be nuts, seeds, avocado and olive oil.

Nutrients for reducing muscle soreness

Antioxidants are key! The high-intensity training of a summer intensive can lead to increased production of free radicals and oxidative stress in the body. It's beneficial to give the body antioxidants and phytonutrients from food to reduce oxidative stress and lactic acid production from hardworking muscles. High intake (five to six servings per day) of fruits and vegetables will make a noticeable difference in how you bounce back day to day. Whole foods, rather than capsules, contain antioxidants in natural ratios and proportions, which may act in synergy to optimize the antioxidant effect. Thus, an adequate intake of vitamins and minerals through a varied and balanced diet remains the best approach to maintain an optimal antioxidant status.

2. Antioxidants are vitamins like C, E, A, beta-carotene, and phytonutrients like resveratrol, anthocyanins and polyphenols. Choose leafy greens, all fruits (especially berries), carrots and other yellow vegetables. Beets and beetroot juice can be a hard sell to dancers unaccustomed to the flavor, but they contain natural nitrates that boost performance and reduce oxidative stress. Supplements won't give dancers the same edge of the synergistic effects of real foods.

Hydration

The first two signs of dehydration are fatigue and poor balance. Thirst doesn't even register with the brain until you have already lost one to two litres of fluids. This level of dehydration leads to a noticeable decrease in performance and brain function. You have too much choreography to learn in a short amount of time, so make sure your large (32 ounce/1 litre) water bottle is your constant companion. Drink at least three of these large water bottles throughout the day. Drink as much as your body needs not to feel thirsty. Using thirst as a measure of how much to drink can be a good indicator, but keep in mind that the awareness of thirst can be affected by stress, nerves, food and sodium intake, so the best bet is to drink regularly throughout the day. Avoid high-sugar and high-caffeine beverages.

Supplements

The question of whether or not to bring vitamins, minerals or other supplements with you to your intensive training session is a very individual one. Consult a dietitian for your unique needs; however, there is considerable evidence to suggest that performers are often vitamin D deficient. We all know that this vitamin plays a crucial role in bone health, but it plays a vital role in immune function and muscle strength too. Inadequate vitamin D can lead to muscle weakness. Current recommendations are to get 600-1000 IU per day.