

Stretching

We all know that stretching is crucial for you to dance better.

That's why we at WCG Entertainment sought professional advice from Karen Moran, owner, founder, and clinical director of FusionArts Physical Therapy in Encino, CA. to help you stretch the right way.

Here's what you need to stretch to dance better and stay injury-free!!

When To Do Each Kind of Stretch

The most crucial factor in regards to stretching is always to warm up first. A proper warm-up should start with some light aerobic activity (such as a gentle jog around the studio) to increase your core temperature. When you produce a light sweat, it's time to engage in some dynamic stretches. Dynamic stretching should start slowly and gradually increase in the speed and power of the movement.

At the end of your cool down after class – when the activity that requires you to be strong and stable has ceased – is an excellent time to do your static stretches. Believe it or not, stretching to your end-range before class reduces strength and stability, as well as increases your risk of injury, so it should be avoided.

Dancers must strive to stretch out every part of the body. An excellent stretching regimen will cover your legs, arms, back, neck, core, ankles, and feet. Stretching can be a fun part of the practice and should not be treated as a chore. Try to introduce new stretches occasionally and use tools or partner-work to help you stretch to keep things interesting. It's so important to take 5 or 10 minutes after a show to stretch before going home and, if they can't, then once they get home.

What to stretch

Though dancing is a full-body workout, some muscles are used more than others and therefore, need more attention after.

Stretching your feet and legs seems like a no-brainer, but there are other muscles at work that aren't as obvious.

Your hip flexors, for example, allow you to lift your knees and bend your waist.

They also play a key role in keeping your hips and lower back secure, flexible, and aligned. Your quadriceps move your knees and help rotate your hips.

They are involved and engaged in almost all leg movements.

The piriformis muscle is located behind your gluteus maximus and assists with rotating your hips and turning out your feet.

Stretch these often-neglected parts of your body to dance better and stay injury-free!

How Long to Hold Stretches

Hold your static stretch (but not your breath) for 30 seconds, then relax. After a brief rest, repeat the stretch two or three times. The changes in your flexibility from stretching in this way will only last less than an hour. However, when performed consistently, as explained above, flexibility gains can be maintained if you are a child or young adult whose bones are still growing to keep stretches to 10 seconds or less.

Contrary to what you may believe, prolonged stretching should only be used by medical professionals and is not appropriate for dancers. Rather than merely stretching muscles and their connective tissues, stretching for extended periods can elongate joints and ligaments, which are there to keep your joints stable. You may think that lying in second while watching TV is doing you good, but this can lead to loss of stability and severe injury, whether in the short-term or further down the track.

The Importance of Breath

There is a reason why yoga and Pilates place so much emphasis on the incorporation of the breath. Correct breath control is essential to getting the most out of your flexibility training. It helps relax the body, improve muscular elasticity, increase blood flow and remove lactic acid, which reduces muscle soreness and the risk of injury.

When stretching during your cool-down, keep your breath fluid, not forced. Use slow, relaxed breathing, with an emphasis on exhalation through the mouth or nose. Inhale through the nose, which will filter and warm the air you inhale and allow more oxygen into your lungs.

What are the Benefits?

The benefits of stretching are plentiful and include the following:

- To increase muscle length permanently. For example, stretch the hamstring muscles so that over time we can kick our leg higher to the front.
- To prevent muscle bulk formation, especially the calf muscles which a dancer wants to be strong and slim, not short and bulky.
- To prevent or alleviate delayed-onset muscle soreness. This is when you ache the day after doing a new exercise, or after doing more than you are used to.
- To disperse lactic acid build-up. This can build up if you have worked a muscle hard.
- To reduce the tension in the muscle. Sometimes a muscle can hurt if we have held an awkward position for a while, or if we are very stressed.

To increase elasticity temporarily. This is to make our muscles more stretchy in the exercise that follows immediately after the stretching.

- To reduce the risk of muscle injury. If a muscle is more stretchy, then it is less likely to be overstretched when we exercise.

7 reasons why flexibility and stretching are essential for dancers

Stretching helps loosen your muscles, which helps to prevent injury. But did you know that it can also help slow the degeneration of joints and enables you to reduce and manage stress? Here are some of the lesser-known reasons why you should make stretching a part of your daily routine.

1. Get a better practice and performance

You get the most out of it! Stretching prepares the body to exercise by loosening the muscles. A flexible joint requires less energy to move, which means stretching creates more energy-efficient movements during your dance practice and on the dance floor. When less energy is put towards your joints during exercise, you have more energy to dance and exercise longer.

2. Promotes blood circulation

Stretching increases the blood supply to your muscles and joints, which means that the transportation of nutrients is increased and overall blood circulation is improved throughout the whole body. When you consider the benefits of good circulation due to stretching, you understand why you should stretch every day.

3. Increases strength and speed

In addition to being able to touch your toes, flexibility results in increased power and speed, and it helps with overall performance when it comes to anything physical or athletic.

4. Relieves pain

Stretching helps relieve pain all over the body. In your hip flexors to alleviate pain and pressure on the spine. Flex your calves to alleviate pain caused by shin splints. Stretch your feet to relieve pain from plantar fasciitis. It can also relieve muscle pain, soreness, and tenderness that accompanies exercise. Stretching will help improve your overall well being.

5. Slows degeneration of joints

Stretching helps your joints fluid and free and can help prevent joint diseases such as arthritis. With the increased blood supply that comes to the joints through stretching, the range of motion in the joints is increased, slowing down the degeneration of joints.

6. Improves posture

If you stretch the muscles in your shoulders, lower back, and chest, your back will properly be aligned, and your posture will be improved!

7. Reduces and manages stress

Stretching reduces the tension in your muscles which result in less stress throughout your whole body. On days that you are feeling especially stressed, try stretching all the muscles in your body, starting with your face muscles, until you get down to the muscles in your feet to feel the pent up stress leave your body.

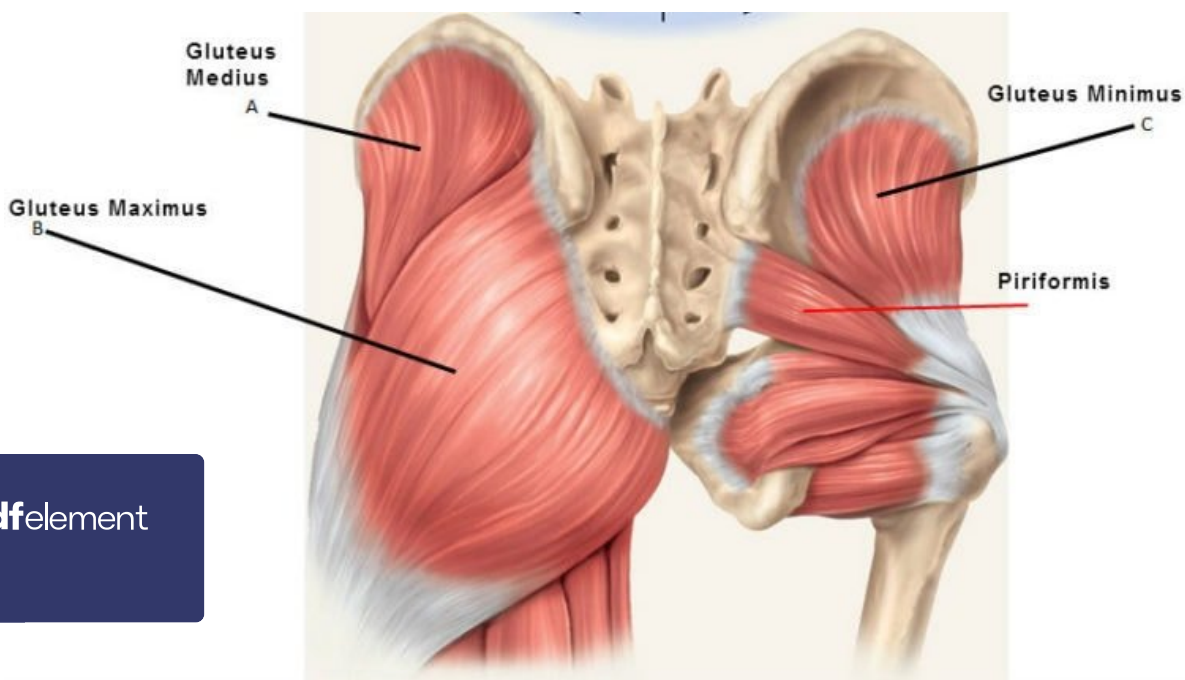
5 Muscular Hot Spots That Affect Dancers

Different sports and athletic activities engage different muscles in the body. Since ballet requires immense lower body strength, ballet dancers tend to develop problem spots and injuries from the waist down. Consider five common hot spots that affect dancers and how to cope with them.

1. Gluteals



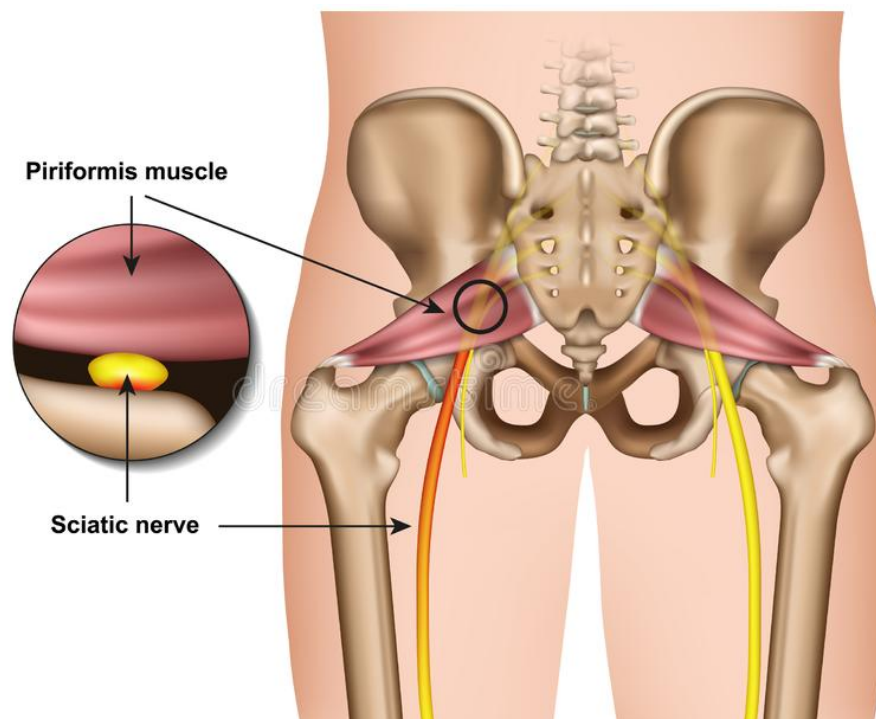
Performers and dancers work their butts off. Repetitive squatting can make your backside ache. Gluteus Maximus and Minimus are also responsible for helping extend your leg in movements. One way to minimize tension in the gluteals is to give them an adequate stretch before class. Try the Butterfly Stretch: Sitting on the floor, press the soles of your feet together and slowly bend forward from the waist.



2. Piriformis



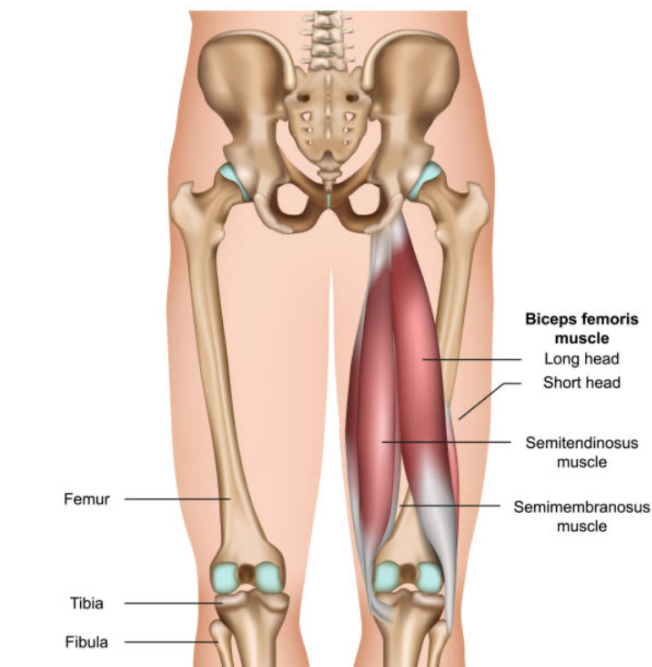
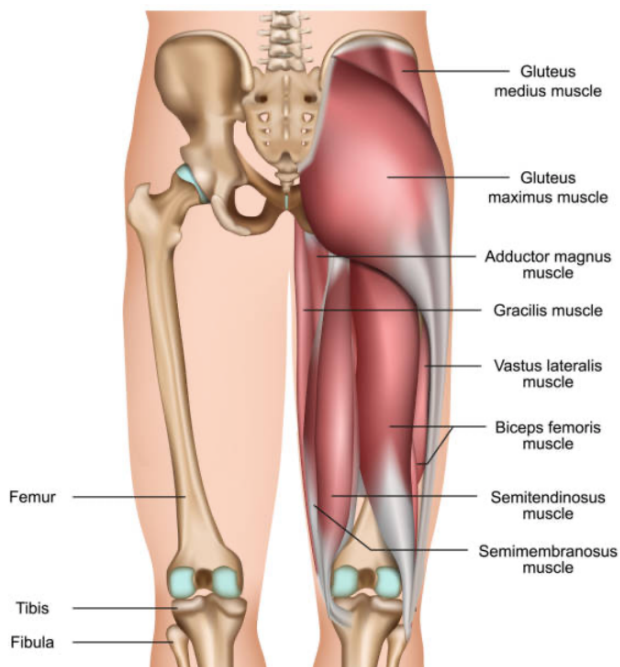
Every time a dancer practices turnout, they are engaging the Piriformis, a muscle located deep in the gluteals. The outward rotation of the hips pinches the muscle and can lead to a form of nerve compression called sciatica. If you feel a sharp or tingling pain down through your buttocks and hamstrings, you may be suffering from this condition. Preventative measures can be taken to reduce pain and inflammation in this area. Try this: Place your ankle on top of the opposite knee, and bend forward. You should feel a deep stretch in your buttocks and hips.



3. Hamstrings



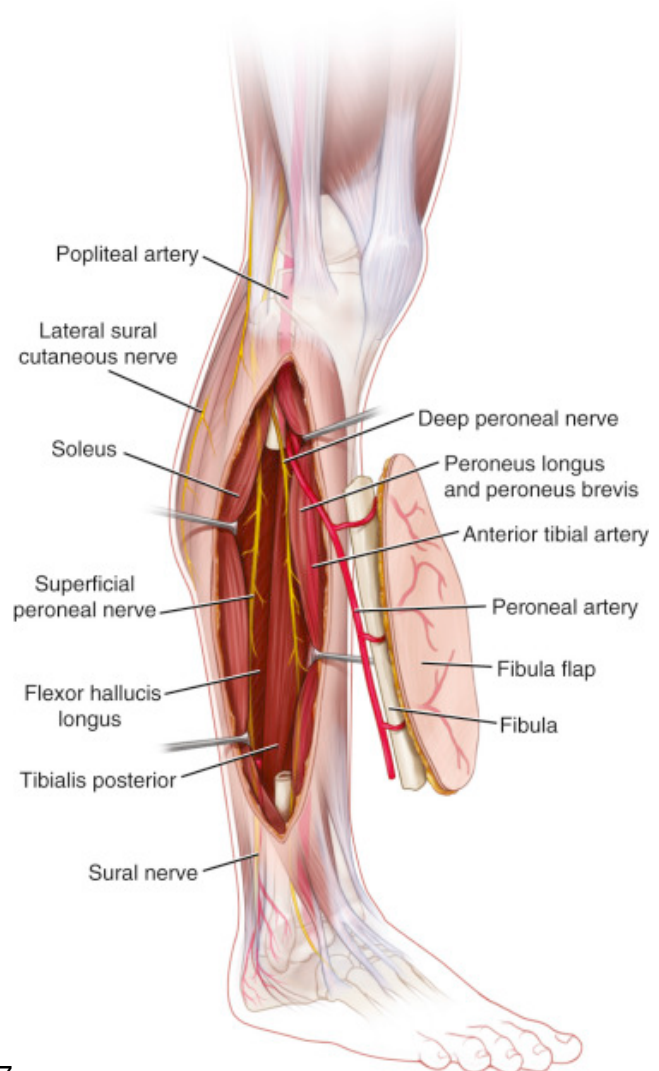
The hamstrings are a major muscle group; they help you to walk, run, and jump. In class, they also help you extend your knees and stabilize your trunk. Students will often complain of stiffness and pain in their hamstrings after class. Make it a habit to stretch the hamstrings every time you warm-up. To increase flexibility, place your leg on a barre, and gently bend forward, reaching your chest toward your knee. Hold for at least 30 seconds. Afterwards, in the standing position, swing each leg back and forth, engaging the muscles in a dynamic stretch that increases circulation and range of motion.



4. Peroneus Longus



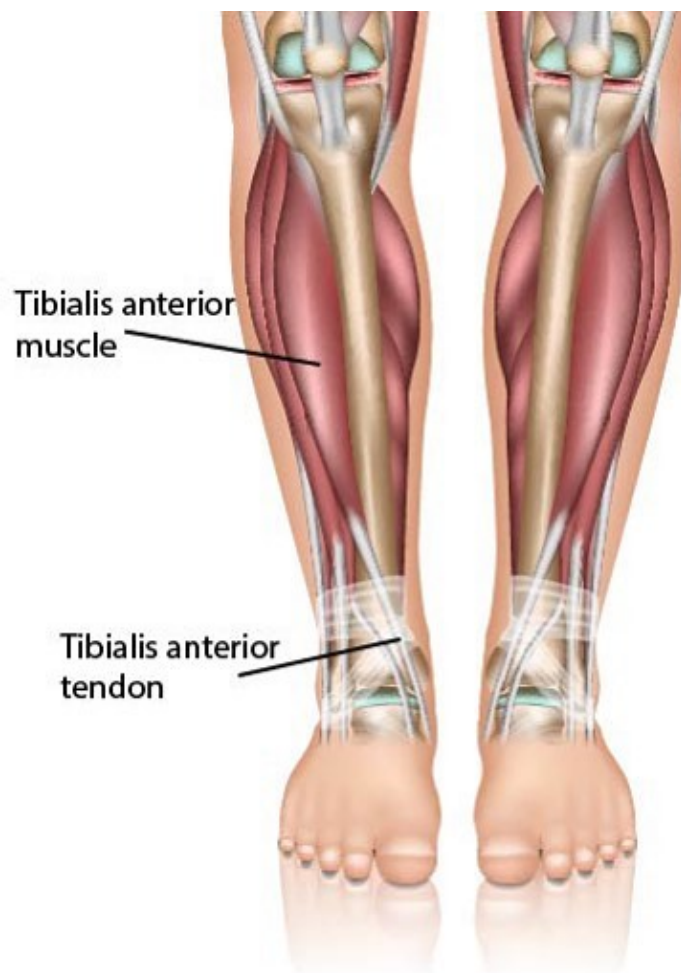
Sore calves? Constant rising to the balls of the feet can strain the Peroneus Longus. This muscle is a crucial player in arching and flexing your foot. Dance students, in particular, are affected. Before class, try this: Facing the barre, point your toe on the floor behind you, followed by slowly placing your heel down. Then, gently bend your knee. This action stretches the Achilles tendon and surrounding calf muscles. Also, practice a series of ankle rolls, drawing circles with your big toe clockwise and counter-clockwise.



5. Tibialis Anterior



Shin splints. The bane of many dancers' existence. Every time a dancer lands from a jump, they place stress on the muscles and joints in the lower leg. If they land incorrectly, the repeated pounding can lead to pain and inflammation in the Tibialis Anterior, the big strip of muscle that runs along the front of the shins. To reduce the risk of shin splints, learn to land from a jump correctly – toe first, then arch, heel last (depending on the dance style and genre). To ease the pain, try self-massage trigger point technique: Press your thumb pads along the muscle, starting below your knee, following the muscle along the edge of the tibia. For added relief, try a topical analgesic like IcyHot.



How to Increase Flexibility

To maintain your range of motion, a weekly stretch session is sufficient. However, if your goal is to increase your flexibility, you need to stretch three to five times per week, and you need to be consistent. It may take several months for specific stretches to become comfortable, but perseverance is vital (just make sure you are not pushing yourself to the point of pain.)

As it takes time for your muscles to adapt and adjust, you must give them time to heal, rest and repair themselves. This means mixing up your stretching programme by alternating light days, heavy days and rest days. Any gym bunny knows the importance of working and resting different muscle groups on different days and making gains in flexibility follows the same principles.

Though it may be tempting, over-stretching increases the risk of injury and can just push your goals even further away.

Stretches should be slow and gentle and should never create a sharp or painful feeling.

Use your breath to assist you, and do not bounce!

However, we will have a detailed look at flexibility later in the program.