

Seniors' Gait, Balance Improved By Dance Therapy

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For seniors, dancing isn't just for fun; it also can be therapeutic. Two recent studies conducted by University of Missouri researchers found that participation in dance-based therapy can improve balance and gait in older adults. Improved functionality among seniors can decrease their risk of falling and reduce costly injuries.

"Creative interventions such as dance-based therapy have the potential to significantly reduce falls in older persons," said Jean Krampe, a registered nurse and doctoral student in the Sinclair School of Nursing. "In the studies, we found improved levels of balance, gait and overall functionality among seniors who participated in regular dance-therapy sessions. Nursing and eldercare professionals can help move these programs into practice to reduce the detrimental burden caused by falls."

The researchers used a dance-therapy program called The Lebed Method (TLM), which includes a combination of low-impact dance steps choreographed to music. Sessions were led by certified TLM instructors and adjusted to fit the specific needs of the seniors who participated.

The most recent study was conducted with residents at TigerPlace, an independent-living community developed by MU nursing researchers to help seniors age in place. The study included 18 dance sessions offered throughout a two-month period. Participants reported that they enjoyed the sessions and wanted to continue the program.

"We found that many seniors are eager to participate and continue to come back after attending sessions because they really enjoy it," Krampe said. "Among seniors that stand up and move during sessions, we found that dance therapy can increase their walking speed and balance, which are two major risk factors for falling."

In 2008, Krampe and MU researchers conducted a six-week pilot study with the Alexian Brothers PACE Program (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) in St. Louis. More than half of the eleven participants self-reported improvements in gait and balance.

TLM, also called Healthy Steps, was created by Shelley Lebed Davis and her two brothers who sought to improve range of motion and boost the spirits of their mother who was recovering from breast cancer. After seeing successful results, they shared the program with hospitals. Today Healthy Steps is used by many cancer patients and in nursing homes worldwide. The MU study is the first to examine the benefits of the program among seniors.

The first study, "Dance-Based Therapy in a Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly," recently was published in *Nursing Administration Quarterly*.

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Emily Martin

University of Missouri-Columbia

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