

So You Want to

Teens

START CROSS-TRAINING All dancers should incorporate weight training and cardio into their routines to build balanced, full-body strength and to prepare for the aerobic demands of dance, says Kendall Alway, founder of SF Performing Arts Physical Therapy. She points to a study which found that, after completing a strength-training program, ballet dancers were stronger, had more endurance and even demonstrated improvements in technique—without gaining “bulk,” so banish that myth from your mind. Alway recommends lifting weights two times per week.

DON'T QUIT OTHER ACTIVITIES According to Iafrate, studies have found that hyperspecialization in young athletes can actually be detrimental, potentially making you more prone to injury as you get older. Nurturing some athletic interests outside the studio will keep you healthier, and may even make you a better dancer.

MANAGE YOUR FLEXIBILITY Many dancers are hypermobile, and must learn to control their range of motion in order to prevent injury. If you need help, seek advice from a dance medicine professional. “Early contact with a physical therapist, especially a dance physical therapist, can make a huge difference,” says Alway.

DON'T OVERSTRETCH Feeling a decrease in flexibility after a growth spurt? This is totally normal, says Iafrate. Rather than overstretching and potentially injuring yourself, be patient—your flexibility will return. Focus on good technique.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY Learn the difference between good pain—soreness that comes from working hard and getting stronger—and pain that indicates injury, says Iafrate. Don't hesitate to seek help if you're experiencing pain that is chronic, outside your control and interferes with your ability to perform.

FUEL RIGHT Make sure you eat enough. Undernutrition can lead to relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S), formerly known as the female athlete triad. This condition can affect dancers of all sexes, hence the name change. It can lead to hormonal imbalance, slow healing from injury, low bone density and missed periods in girls.



Dance Forever?

A decade-by-decade guide to caring for your body over a long career

BY GARNET HENDERSON

Throughout the dance field, artists are proving that early retirement is no longer an inevitability. "The myth that you have to stop dancing once you hit your 30s is pretty much gone," says Julia Iafrate, founder of the Columbia Dance Medicine clinic in New York City. However, staying healthy requires consistency and hard work. Caring properly for your body at all stages of your career will ensure that you can continue dancing for as long as you want.

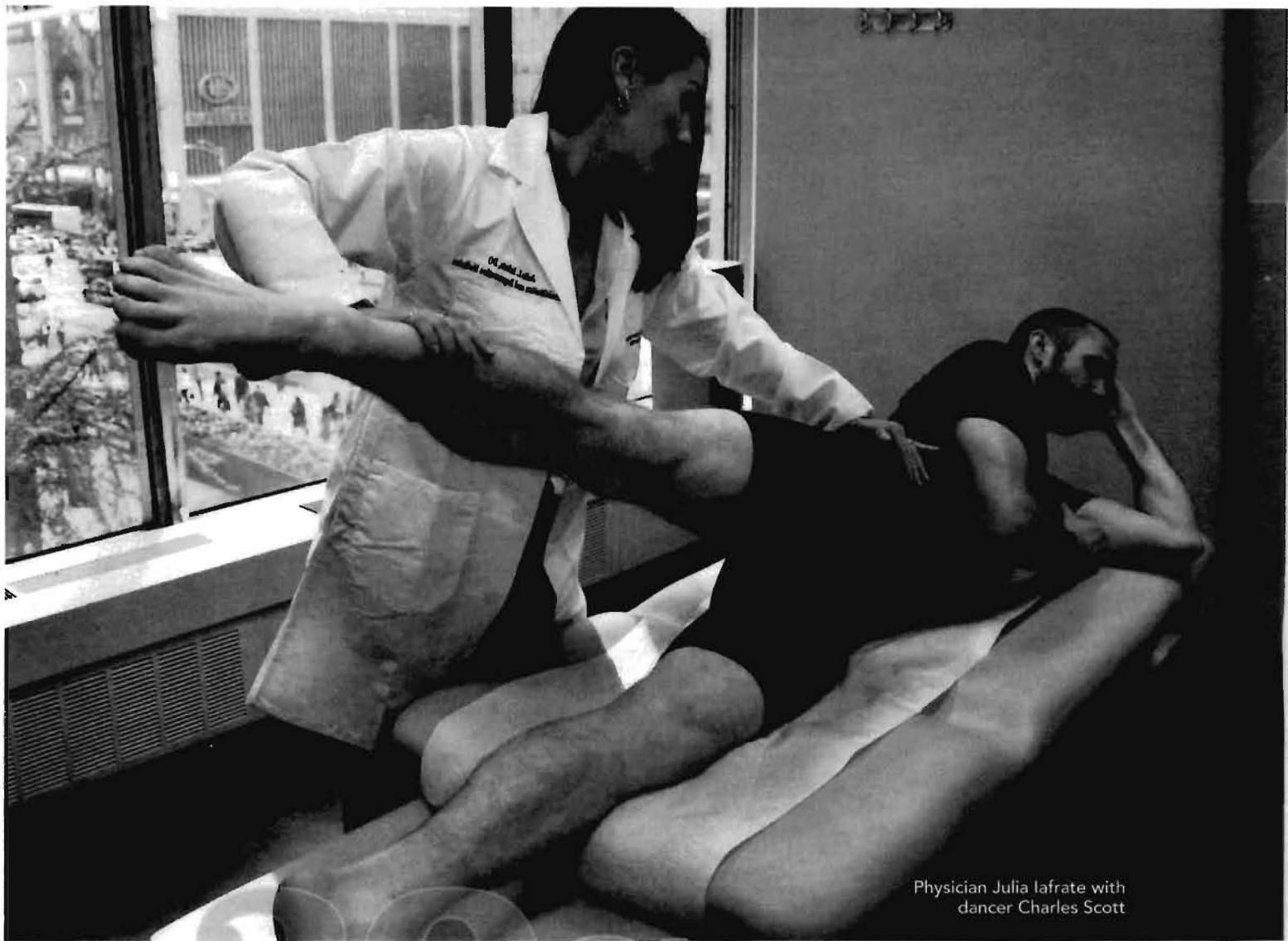
20s

PUSH YOURSELF STRATEGICALLY As you head into professional life, keep up with your cross-training and always warm up properly before dancing. Consider working with a trainer if you feel lost at the gym, and don't be afraid to try new things. "Dance training is very repetitive and can become mundane. Use your cross-training for fun," says Iafrate.

FIND YOUR DOCS "Professional dancers need a health care team," says Alway. At a minimum, dancers should establish relationships with a primary care doctor, a physical therapist and a mental health professional. It may also be helpful to seek out other care providers, like massage therapists and acupuncturists.

WORK WITHIN YOUR BUDGET Many dancers face financial constraints that may lead to negative health effects. These can include poor nutrition, so seek advice from a dietician about how to eat as healthily as possible on a budget. Money troubles may also keep dancers out of class, says Risa Steinberg, who teaches at Juilliard. "It can be very challenging, but whether it's a traditional class or just you alone in the studio or gym giving yourself a class, you have to maintain your body," she says.

REST "You need two days off from dancing per week," says Iafrate. Aim for a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night. On long days, says Alway, decide when to push and when to mark.



Physician Julia Iafrate with dancer Charles Scott

30s

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Julie Iafrate

INVESTIGATE YOUR INJURIES Pain that you’ve ignored can catch up with you in your 30s. “I call it the stacking of injuries,” says Iafrate. “You have one injury that leads to a second one. If you ignore that, it leads to a third injury. Just like an onion, sometimes we have to peel back one layer at a time to see what’s going on,” she says. When you’re in pain, don’t ignore it. And take the time to get to the bottom of any chronic problems you are experiencing. Injuries can also take a psychological toll, so keep that in mind as you plan your recovery.

CHECK IN WITH YOUR BODY Develop a body scan practice to help you stay attuned to what your body needs, suggests Sharon Milanese, former rehearsal director for Lucinda Childs Dance Company. Take time every day to check in with how you’re feeling, whether or not you’re taking class.

STRENGTH-TRAIN As hypermobile dancers age, muscular strength becomes increasingly important for joint stability, says Iafrate, so don’t skimp on cross-training or a proper warm-up. As they become established in their careers, many dancers also pursue certifications in personal training, Pilates, Gyrotonic and other modalities. In addition to supplementing your income, Alway says this can give you more resources to care for your own body as you age.

40s

ADJUST YOUR APPROACH Use the knowledge you've gained to make necessary adjustments in your approach to dance. "It gets harder to dance with no discomfort as you get older. However, a lot of things get easier, because you figure out exactly how much energy you need to put into certain movements," says Milanese. "I personally find it helpful to think about breathing fully and moving from my bones, rather than thinking about initiating movement from the muscles in such a minute way."

HONOR YOUR RANGE OF MOTION Generally speaking, flexibility declines in your late 30s to early 40s, says Iafrate, and you may also start to see some arthritis, which can further limit mobility. Be realistic about how you may need to adapt the type of dancing you're doing.

RETHINK YOUR SCHEDULE Dancers who have demanding performance schedules in their 40s need to be extra-vigilant about taking time to rest and recover. However, according to Alway, dancers who transition to a more part-time schedule will actually find that they need to work out more often outside of dance so as not to experience a decline in their fitness level.

MANAGE ANY PAIN "Dancers usually have an extremely high pain tolerance, and as you age you see a decrease in that tolerance. That's your body shouting at you, 'Hey I'm hurt!'" says Iafrate. Work with your doctor to manage your pain—don't try to cover it up.



Risa Steinberg teaching class

50s and beyond

**"EXPERIENCE
GIVES
YOU MORE
CHOICES."**

Risa Steinberg

KEEP STRENGTH-TRAINING "Starting in the 50s, there are some major hormonal changes," says Alway. For women, menopause causes a significant reduction in estrogen levels, which can lead to declining bone density. Consider getting a bone scan to check for osteoporosis or osteopenia. Muscle mass also tends to decline after 50. A good strength-training routine will help address both of these concerns.

STAY UP TO DATE "Dance medicine has come so far, and there are so many more people out there doing great research," says Iafrate. If you're injured, try to find health care providers who specialize in treating dancers, and stay updated on the latest information so you know what questions to ask.

FOLLOW YOUR ARTISTIC INSTINCT Rather than focusing on things you may not be able to do anymore, let your experience work to your advantage. "Experience gives you more choices. If something doesn't feel as readily available to you physically, you have choices as to how to navigate that. Listen to your instinct," Steinberg says.