



ballet workout

Plié your way to fitness

JENNIFER LOCKYER

BALLET EXERCISES
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN PHILLIPS

November rain, December ice. Inevitably, physical activity moves more indoors. Here's an at-home workout that will strengthen your muscles, improve your posture and balance, increase your suppleness and flexibility and provide a bit of cardio as well. Tapping into the beauty of classical dance will also make you feel good — like a graceful performer walking tall rather than a fitness drudge sweating over grunt work.

To get you launched, *Canadian Health* attended a class at The National Ballet of Canada's Walter Carsen Centre in Toronto. We caught up with the acclaimed company in early August as it started training for the 2008 season of its timeless Christmas classic, *The Nutcracker*. Our aim was to suss out some simple ballet moves that could help non-dancers get toned and limber. Ballet, after all, is not all gravity-defying leaps and impossible feats of equilibrium; it includes a lot of basic stretching and strengthening.

We also dropped in on Paul Papoutsakis, a former rugby player and now the company's resident athletic therapist, who soothes the aches and pains of the hard-working dancers and tells them how to avoid injuries. His prime advice for beginners? "In ballet, it's crucial to keep the pelvis stable so you're not tipping over onto your hips and putting excess pressure on the joints,"

he says. "Your muscles do the work."

Papoutsakis notes that many ballet moves are done with the hips rotated outward. While this can be a strain on dancers rehearsing and performing for many hours a day, it should not hurt amateurs doing occasional short workouts. He also stresses the importance of keeping your spine straight and your shoulders down, thereby making the scapular (shoulder blade) muscles carry their share of the load.

Why is it, we asked him, that ballet dancers, unlike highly trained athletes, seem to retain the physique of young men and women long after they've left the discipline? "It's about carriage and posture," he says. "Ballet dancers carry themselves erect, so as they get older, they tend not to have the bent and stooped look associated with aging." And their early training stays with them. "They learn from the start to follow a strict dietary regimen. And they drink lots of water, which helps to keep their muscles supple. As well, they stretch not once a day, but all day long — even when they're not dancing."

Sound good? Well, sauté into a leotard, jeté over to a sturdy support, put on some ballet music (see "Ballet Resources," p. 47), and with head high, shoulders straight and pelvis stable, try these simplified ballet moves. To serve as support, find a solid counter, dresser, chair or sofa back, radiator or railing a little higher than the top of your hips. Let's call it your ballet barre. You can wear slippers or go barefoot, but be sure to work on a soft carpet or a large exercise mat in case you tumble — even seasoned dancers fall.

This complete workout should take you about 30 minutes. When you're finished, go ahead and take a bow or, even better, drop a curtsy.

Jennifer Lockyer studied for four years at Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet School and now works in commercial real estate leasing in Toronto.

Pliés (knee bends)



With shoulders gracefully down and back and chin up, lengthen your spine and elongate your body, finding your centre of balance. This is the basic posture you'll need to focus on throughout the ballet workout.

Place your left hand on your support, an arm's length or so away, and drop your elbow slightly. Keep in mind that your barre acts only as a steadying support and should not be relied on to hold your weight. Your muscles will do that.

Rotate your hips and the balls of your feet outward with your heels touching. Although ballet has five basic starting positions, in this beginner's workout, this will be your starting position for each exercise. Make sure your ankles are not rolling forward and your weight is evenly distributed on both feet. Extend your other arm fully above your head.

This move will work the torso muscles, back muscles and abdominals. "Remember to stabilize your pelvis, and don't tip onto your hips," warns Papoutsakis.

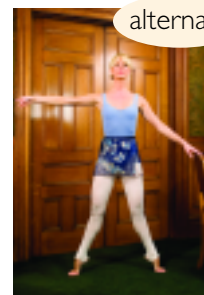
Bend both knees as far as you can, keeping your heels on the ground. As you do this, sweep your free extended arm downward in a semicircular motion. Then straighten your legs, at the same time returning your arm to its above-the-head position. Do nine more, then do 10 with the opposite arm.

"Because you're in a squat position during plié, you're working the quadriceps muscles in the front of the thighs and the gluteus muscles in the buttocks," says Papoutsakis. "The glutes work in conjunction with the quads to keep the knees in line with the toes. This can have a positive impact on the knees and can help ward off knee injuries."

Relevés (foot raises)

In the same starting position as above, with one arm on the barre and the other extended horizontally to the side, bend into a plié, then slowly lift up onto the balls of your feet, keeping your legs and knees straight and extending your arm upwards. Your stomach muscles are engaged, and your back is straight. Do 10 relevés in this position, then 10 more with your feet turned out and shoulder-width apart (known in ballet as second position).

"In this exercise, you're automatically working your calf muscles, and also major muscles in the feet, such as the tibialis posterior, which supports the arch, and the flexor hallucis longus, which is a strong flexor of the big toe," says Papoutsakis. "As well, you're contracting the glutes to help you rise. But try not to let your ankles go inward. Go up with your heels straight."

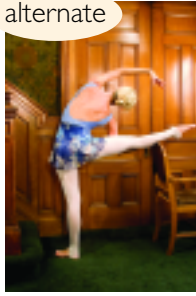


Torso stretches

basic



alternate



Place one hand on the barre, keeping the leg on that side straight. Extend the opposite leg and arm to the side. Take a deep breath, then bend your torso and extended arm as far as you can toward the barre. Straighten. Do nine more, then 10 on the opposite side. For a more challenging exercise, instead of extending one leg on the floor, place its ankle firmly on the barre and perform the stretch bending the torso down toward the toes of the raised leg.

This stretch will work the torso muscles, back muscles and abdominals. "Remember always to stabilize your pelvis so you don't tip your weight onto your hips," warns Papoutsakis. "With your leg mounted on the barre, you'll feel a stretch in the hamstrings and in the adductor muscles of the inner thighs as well."

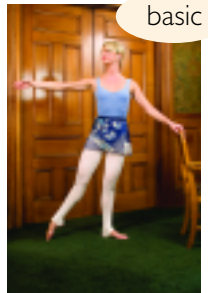
Ronds de jambe (leg circles)

In heels-together starting position, place your left hand on the barre and extend your right arm to the side. Extend your right leg, with toes nicely pointed, in front of you on the floor. Draw it around to the side, extending the leg out as far as possible, then to the back, as though you're outlining something between a circle and a semicircle on the floor. Leading with your heel, bring your foot from behind back to your starting position. You can keep your free arm extended to the side or move it in a semicircle as described in the plié. Do 10 on each side.

For a more demanding rond, raise your foot, with toes pointed, to approximately knee height and trace circles with your leg in the air:

"This exercise works the hip flexor muscles as the leg goes forward. As it rotates around and back, it works the tensor fasciae latae — the muscle on the outside of your hip — and, again, the glutes," says Papoutsakis. As always, the movement should not sit on the hip joints.

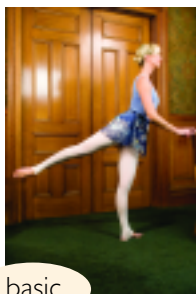
basic



alternate



Arabesques (leg lifts in the Arab manner)



basic



alternate

Heels together, feet turned out, face the barre and place both hands on it. Rotate your right leg outward, extend it to the back, and lift it off the ground as far as is comfortable, bending forward slightly toward the barre. Do 10 with each leg.

Ready for something a bit more difficult? Make a deeper bend toward the barre and extend your leg high in the air behind you. Keep your back straight as you return to an upright position.

"The arabesque works the gluteus maximus in the buttocks and the hamstring muscles at the back of the thighs," explains Papoutsakis.



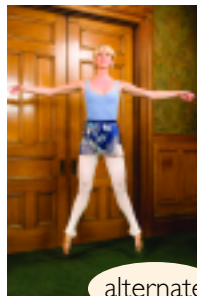
Visit
The National Ballet
of Canada website
at www.national.ballet.ca
and see Karen Kain's
*A Beginner's Guide
to Ballet.*

Sautés (small jumps)

Here comes the cardio and calorie-burning part of your ballet workout. Step away from the barre. Place your arms in front of you at the top of the thighs, with the fingers of both hands almost touching. With heels together and feet turned out in the standard starting position, bend into a plié, then jump straight up as high as you can with both legs. Land as gently as possible in the plié position. Do five sets of four sautés. Try a few jumps in second position, with your feet shoulder-width apart.



basic



alternate

To make things more interesting, experiment with adding changements (alternations) to your sautés. Cross your feet in front during one jump and in back during another; landing each time with one foot in front of the other.

"In sautés, you get eccentric loading, or lengthening of the muscles, in the quads and in the calf and lower-leg muscles. This involves rapid stretching and contraction," says Papoutsakis. "The calves do the work in takeoff and landing, but the quads work, too, because they keep both legs straight." You also experience deceleration in the ankles. Deceleration is also an eccentric contraction, in which muscles lengthen rather than shorten while they contract, just as your thigh muscles do when you walk downhill. The Achilles tendon and calf muscles in each leg stretch out as you land and recoil, then help you to re-accelerate and take off again. A similar process occurs in the quads. If these muscle groups are strong, deceleration will help maintain control of your feet and knees. "This is a good low-impact plyometric exercise," he says. Plyometrics train you to make powerful movements with rapid changes, which improves balance and coordination and stands you in good stead in any sport.

Ballet Resources

books

Ballet for Dummies by Scott Speck and Evelyn Cisneros gives illustrated explanations of moves.

The Joffrey Ballet School's Ballet-Fit by Allison Kyle Leopold and Dena Simone Moss shows adult beginners how to condition with ballet.

websites

www.YouTube.com features Ballet Dancing for Beginners at Expert Village, where ballet moves are demonstrated by a non-intimidating teacher. On YouTube, you can also find specific moves, such as pliés and ronds de jambe, performed by professional ballet dancers. Just keyboard in the move you want, and press Search.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_ballet_terms provides explanations of ballet terms.

www.danceclassmusic.com and www.classical.com allow you to download ballet music you can exercise to.

cds

The National Ballet of Canada's website sells a range of ballet music CDs.

www.rlongballetmusic.com offers two CDs of piano music for ballet exercises, performed by Canadian composer Robert Long.

EMI's *100 Best Ballet* offers inspiring highlights from works ranging from *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* to *West Side Story*. 🎧