

HEALTHY LIVING

Work out like a dancer

Book from ballet group tells how to exercise to get fit, avoid injuries

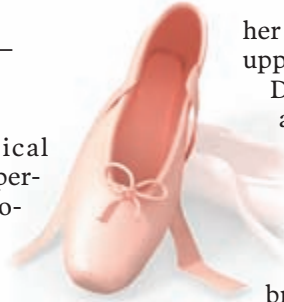
BY VIKKI CONWELL

Cox News Service

The physical demands of performing emotional and theatrical ballet, jazz, modern and other dance genres provide Renee Robinson with quite a good workout. So, before and after her performances, the professional dancer gets in a really good workout.

"I'm a huge advocate of movement," said Robinson, who jumps rope, walks, works out at the gym and performs yoga and other exercises to stay fit and energized. "Dance is a physical movement, but doing other things enhances what I have to do on the floor," she said.

In her 27th season with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Robinson says her muscles are longer now because of the additional strength and conditioning she enjoys. She's also improved her stamina by augmenting



her cardio workout with more upper-body movements.

Dancing merges art with athleticism, and the Ailey dancers are known as some of the most athletic, thanks to their varied choreography. The Ailey troupe this year celebrates 50 years of electrifying audiences with their high energy and passion coupled with smooth, controlled and deliberate movements.

"They all have very healthy-looking, well-toned bodies," said Shaw Bronner, director of physical therapy for the Ailey dancers. "You know right away that this is an athlete."

Dancing conditions and tones the body, improves posture and increases strength, and "a strong muscular body is a healthy body when it's flexible and supple," says Robinson, whose exercise techniques, and those of other Ailey dancers,

are showcased in "Alvin Ailey Dance Moves!" (by Lise Friedman; Harry N. Abrams; \$24.95). The fitness book draws from the disciplines of the Ailey School to help nondancers feel and look like one with exercises that can be done at home.

To achieve the look of a dancer, start by moving, Robinson recommends.

Do whatever you enjoy, such as swimming, jumping rope or throwing the ball in the yard, and do it frequently. Also, practice good form by making sure your technique



ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

Renee Robinson says, "I'm a huge advocate of movement." Her exercise techniques are among those showcased in the book "Alvin Ailey Dance Moves!"



ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

is correct, and treat yourself to therapeutic massages to relieve stress and prevent injury.

"It's a great help ... especially if you're an athlete," she said.

The injury rate among dancers is quite high, and their career lifespan low, says Bronner. To prevent muscle strains, let the body do what it wants to do instead of forcing it, she says.

"If you've never danced before, then you have no business trying to do a split," she said.

Robinson, who believes in feeling "zesty, sparkly, awake and energetic" throughout her day, stresses a diet that keeps the body moving inside and

out. She eats plenty of leafy green vegetables and whole fruits to keep her digestive system flowing, drinks lots of water and avoids sodas and alcohol.

Still, her diet does not involve complete deprivation, as Robinson treats herself to an occasional burger, fries and potato chips, and will "kill for good macaroni and cheese."

Robinson attributes her nearly three decades of high-level performing to her diet and exercise regimen, and describes herself as "the age that gets it done, the age I love being and still healthy enough to apply it." ■

Combat changes in appetite, mood with exercise

BY MARJIE GILLIAM

Cox News Service

The cold winter months can also bring about changes in appetite and mood, even though we don't hear as much about it.

It has been theorized that because fat is our bodies' natural insulator, we tend to eat more in the wintertime as a survival mechanism. While we know that too much body fat is unhealthy, it is true that individuals with greater amounts are better insulated against the cold and lose less heat than their leaner counterparts.

Researchers know that the hormone leptin, made by the body's fat cells, suppresses appetite while the hormone ghrelin signals the brain that you are hungry. It is believed that certain people may not process leptin as efficiently during cold winter months, increasing the likelihood of weight gain.

Although questions remain as to why this may occur, experts say that increasing the production of leptin can curb appetite and make you feel more full.

One way you can give your body more leptin is to get enough sleep. One study showed that participants had increased

ghrelin levels, hunger and appetite when they got inadequate rest.

Along with producing a calming affect, the brain chemical serotonin is an appetite suppressant and can affect sleep and mood. If levels are too low or there is an imbalance between serotonin and other hormones, depression, food cravings and/or lack of quality sleep may occur.

It is not unusual for people with low serotonin levels to find themselves looking for an energy boost from coffee or other caffeinated beverages, drinking alcohol or craving foods like sugary snacks, potato chips or white-flour products.

Consuming these types of "empty-calorie" junk foods usually perpetuates the problem, leaving the person with an eventual "crash" a short time afterward. When this slump is felt, the cycle starts again, and the person will often look for another boost of energy.

In some individuals, low serotonin levels contribute to compulsive behaviors such as over-exercising, binge eating and/or drinking, which temporarily raise levels, or they may experience extreme feelings of anger or sadness.



Exercise during the winter helps elevate serotonin levels, experts say.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that most commonly begins in late fall and lasts through winter. It is believed that, because the body responds to seasonal changes in light, the lack of sunlight during winter months

may create imbalances of hormones and brain chemicals, including serotonin.

In one study, production of serotonin by the brain was found to be lowest in winter and was strongly correlated with the amount of bright sunlight during the day. Other than bright sunlight, no other seasonal factors had an effect on serotonin production.

Scientists are still studying how environmental factors associated with the winter months may also contribute to SAD. Fortunately, healthy behaviors that help manage stress, such as yoga, meditation, massage, moderate physical activity and exposure to sunlight in limited amounts, have been associated with increased levels of serotonin.

Physical activity during winter months is especially helpful not only for weight management, but for keeping mood elevated because it increases production of the body's feel-good chemicals. Exercise also aids in regulating blood sugar, which can help control food cravings. ■

Marjie Gilliam is an International Sports Sciences Association Master certified personal trainer and fitness consultant.