

scan club

A NEWSLETTER FOR SCAN MEMBERS

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Dancing to Good Health

The first night SCAN members Steve and Marty Avey tried modern square dancing they were hooked. They saw an ad in the newspaper more than a year ago and have been dancing ever since.

Modern square dancing uses contemporary music, anything from Lady Gaga to songs from Phantom of the Opera. They don't shout a lot of vocals ("yee-haw!") or dress in traditional attire. And some of the calls (dance figures) have updated names.

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Just wanting to have some fun, the Aveys had no idea how much square dancing would improve their health. “I actually lost 10 pounds,” Marty says. The constant movement in the dancing has also provided some relief for their arthritis.

The health benefits that Marty and Steve have noticed shouldn’t be too surprising. In 30 minutes of square dancing, dancers burn 200 to 400 calories. On a typical night of two hours of dancing, square dancers take 9,000 to 10,000 steps—about five miles. Health experts recommend 30 to 40 minutes of exercise three or four times each week. A few two-hour dance sessions every week go a long way toward meeting that goal.

But the Aveys have so much fun dancing that they don’t even realize they’re exercising.

An exercise in focus

The most unexpected change in health, however, may be in their heads, literally. “I think our memory is much sharper,” Marty says. “I think we’re more mentally alert.” They have to be: Square dancing has approximately 115 calls that can be used in different variations.

“Learning specific calls takes time and practice,” Steve says. “You never know how a square dance caller might string those calls together. No two dances are ever the same, so you are always listening, thinking, and reacting.”

It took about nine months of regular dancing to learn the calls, and the risk of forgetting the calls adds to the incentive of dancing regularly. “If you don’t dance for three or four weeks in a row, it’s easy to forget,” says Marty. She and Steve dance twice a week in various clubs in the San Diego area.

Marty Knutson, president of the Wrestling Wranglers Square Dance Club in San Diego where the Aveys dance, has noticed an increase in her club members’ energy and alertness. “You stay mentally sharp and it gets you out of the house and gives you something fun to do,” she says.

Singles are welcome

For those shy about trying out modern square dancing, the square dance community is a welcoming one. Veteran dancers, called “angels,” often help the beginners. Dancers with hearing issues can tune their hearing aids into the caller’s transmitter or borrow receiver sets to help them hear the calls.

And singles need not worry about arriving without a partner because the dancers are in squares of eight and easily grouped together. “It’s not a couples or solitary dance. This is very group-oriented,” says Marty Knutson. Often, the socializing continues even when the dancing is done.

“We have lawyers, teachers, doctors, dentists, police officers,” Marty Avey says of the dancers in their clubs. “It’s really for everybody.”

Many square dance clubs sponsor dance classes, where they provide the caller, the venue and food. If you’re interested in square dancing, look for a club with classes through such websites as wherethedance.com, dosado.com, or thewranglers.org. Clubs in your area can also be found through meetup.com. Or call your local senior centers to see what dance classes take place near you.



More Ways Dancing Improves Your Health

Square dancing isn’t the only fun way to use dance as exercise. The waltz and tango have health benefits, as do ballroom and line dancing. You probably know that dancing improves heart health, tones muscles, increases energy, and relieves stress. Recent studies have found that dancing can also:

- **Strengthen bones**, helping to prevent or slow down osteoporosis.
- **Improve balance**, which leads to fewer falls.
- **Maintain your brain.** Dancing helps slow the onset of Alzheimer’s disease and helps prevent dementia.
- **Help you rehab.** Dancing is a safe and healthy aerobic alternative for those recovering from heart surgery—square dancing is even safe for those recovering from knee surgery (with your doctor’s okay).