To Dance or Not to Dance? A Comparison of Balance, Physical Fitness and Quality of Life in Older Irish Set Dancers and Age-Matched Controls

Joanne Shanahan, Louise Coman, Frank Ryan, Jean Saunders, Keran O’Sullivan, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Amanda M. Clifford
University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

Background: The population is ageing and regular exercise is advocated to prevent progressive decline in balance, functional independence and quality of life. Set dancing is a popular form of exercise among older adults internationally. Yet, no study has examined if long-term participation is associated with physical or psychological benefits. The aim of this study is to determine if older adults regularly participating in Irish set dancing have superior balance, physical fitness and quality of life compared to age-matched controls.

Methods: A community-based, observational cross-sectional design was used for this study. Regular set dancers (n = 39) and age-matched controls (n = 33) were recruited. Participants were assessed using the physical activity scale for the elderly (physical activity levels), mini-BESTest (balance) and senior fitness test (battery of functional fitness tests). Quality of life was also assessed using the EuroQol EQ visual analogue scale.

Results: When controlling for between-group differences in levels of physical activity (ANCOVA analysis), the dancers had significantly better balance, functional capacity and quality of life (all p < 0.05) compared to controls. No differences between the groups were observed in other measures of functional fitness.

Conclusion: The findings of this study suggest regular participation in set dancing is associated with health benefits for older adults. These results may inform future studies prospectively examining the role of set dancing for falls prevention, emotional wellbeing and cognitive function in community-dwelling older adults.