

Dancing their falls away

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"Dance is a complex sensory motor rhythmic activity," says researcher Dr Merom. [Image: Flickr/Gerard Stolk]

Foxtrot, salsa, rumba! Twice weekly ballroom dancing classes for senior citizens could bring back the balance and strength needed to prevent falls in elderly Australians, according to University of Sydney researchers.

A multi-centre project titled The effectiveness of social [dancing](#) as a strategy to prevent falls in older people: a cluster randomised controlled trial has been funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and will be led by Dr Dafna Merom, an Honorary Associate at the University of Sydney's School of Public Health and co-appointee at the University of Western Sydney.

Dr Merom says it is widely acknowledged that falls are one of the most common health problems among older people, and this study has the potential to reduce the incidence of falls for elderly Australians by as much 37 percent.

"We know that formal [exercise programs](#), particularly those that include balance challenging training, can help prevent falls, but formal training exercises may not be the best way to optimise results. There are promising alternatives," she says.

Dr Merom is aiming to introduce classic ballroom dance routines including the rumba, foxtrot, salsa, the waltz, and even some 'rock n roll' as twice-weekly recreational activities at 13 aged care centres and retirement villages across Sydney.

Often described as 'old time dancing', Merom says these classic dances have the right moves and more.

"Dance is a complex sensory motor [rhythmic activity](#). It also has cognitive and social dimensions. This package as a whole can simultaneously address a wide range of physiological and cognitive risk factors that contribute to falls."

"Evidence from preliminary study showed what a promising, sustainable alternative to formal exercise programs social and ballroom dancing can be."

"Small-scale randomised controlled trials have shown that all sorts of dance styles can improve measures of balance and mobility in older people."

"Studies have shown that seniors who do some type of dancing have better balance and gait characteristics than people of a similar age who

don't, including those who exercise. Social dancing or ballroom dancing is enjoyable and already available in the community," suggests Dr Merom.

The study will be the first of its kind internationally to test the effectiveness of typical community social dance programs on falls and cognition in older people.

The researchers are aiming to recruit 450 older adults who will be engaged in the dance program, which will run for a year.

The multi-centre study will include researchers from the University of Sydney, University of Western Sydney, Australian National University, and the University of Hong Kong.

Provided by University of Sydney

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