

Latin dancing may have health benefits for older adults

March 4 2016

A four-month dance program helped older Latino adults walk faster and improved their physical fitness, which may reduce their risk for heart disease, according to research presented at the American Heart Association's Epidemiology/Lifestyle 2016 Scientific Sessions.

Researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago tested whether a community-based intervention focused on Latin dancing could benefit 54 Spanish-speaking adults (about 65 years old, 80 percent Mexican female) who were not very physically active. Participants were randomly assigned to either participate in a dance program twice a week for four months or to attend a health education program. All participants completed questionnaires about their leisure time [physical activity](#) and a 400-meter walk test at the start and end of the study.

After four months of twice-weekly Latin dancing, researchers found:

- Dancers walked faster and were more physically active during their leisure time than before they started dancing.
- Dancers completed a 400-meter walk in just under 392 seconds compared with almost 430 seconds at the start of the study.
- Leisure physical activity rose from 650 minutes to nearly a total of 818 minutes per week.

Those in the health education classes had a smaller improvements in their fitness—they finished the 400-meter walk in about 409 seconds at the end of the study compared with 419 seconds four months earlier;

total time spent on weekly leisure physical activity increased from 522 minutes to 628 minutes over the course of the study.

The dance program is a program called BAILAMOS®, a culturally-tailored, community-based lifestyle intervention developed at the University of Illinois at Chicago by David X. Marquez and Miguel Mendez, included four different dance styles—merengue, bachata, cha cha cha and salsa—led by the dance instructor, with more complex choreography as the program progressed.

Increasing physical activity is one of the key 2020 Impact Goals of the American Heart Association, which calls for all adults to get a minimum of 150 minutes of [moderate physical activity](#) or at least 75 minutes of [vigorous physical activity](#) (or a combination of both) each week. Regular physical activity has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and complications associated with advancing age as well as improve balance, mobility and reduce stress.

Scaling up such a culturally-attuned, and what appears to be a fun intervention could have significant public health effects, said Priscilla Vásquez, M.P.H., lead study author at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"There are many barriers older Latino adults face, and they are busy with caregiving and other responsibilities, so often physical activity takes a back seat and many times the opportunities are unavailable," Vásquez said. "This program engaged them on many levels, physically, culturally and emotionally. Anecdotally, I've heard participants say attending dance class is their stress relief. They also interact with others and build community. This impacts their physical as well as emotional health and wellbeing."

Dancing could have wider health implications, too. Vásquez said the

research team is interested in testing whether BAILAMOS© can help older Latinos already experiencing mild cognitive impairment. "We are interested in using magnetic resonance imaging to see if dancing positively affects their brains," she said.

Provided by American Heart Association

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