

Nutrition and Dance

Ballet dancers are notoriously thin. Why? Ballet is not just about grace and agility, but about *line*. The lines our bodies make in space are scrutinized by instructors, choreographers and ourselves, as well as our audiences, whether they realize it or not. How to achieve beautiful line while our bodies mature can be a difficult “line” to walk. Setting up healthy eating habits can make or break a dancer’s career.

HEALTHY DIET

Healthy eating habits can be difficult to foster, but they are OH SO IMPORTANT at a young age. Habits have usually settled in by puberty, when the body changes, quite often bringing with it some challenges of maintaining a lean body. Your health during this time is paramount. Your body is setting up bone mass and building muscle, so your intake has to do more than just get you through daily life. If your daily regime includes two or more hours of ballet classes, you should be incredibly careful about what you consume.

Avoid empty calories which will only temporarily satisfy your hunger, but will not satisfy the more important needs of your body’s development. Foods in this category are high in sugars or saturated fats (2 grams or more per serving) and consist of more than 200 calories per serving with little or no health benefits — think cookies, chips and that seemingly essential Frappuccino (order yours sugar free with non-fat milk).

Foods which can safely be consumed in moderation, contain less than 2 grams of saturated fat and less than 200 calories per serving. They often have some nutritional benefit — think pretzels, multigrain chips and peanut butter. These foods are not bad for you, but should not be the main event in your diet.

SNACK ON THIS



The healthiest foods are fruits and vegetables, are made from whole grain, or are composed mostly of lean protein or low-fat dairy. These good-for-you foods are not only lower in calories — to keep the body lean and the line long — but also have more nutritional worth

for building bones and muscles, a MUST for every dancer. And, if you decide to stop dancing for whatever reason, you’ve built the good habits that will help keep you healthy for the rest of your life.

Don’t let yourself get so hungry during the day that when you finally get home at night you want to binge eat. If you can be organized about meals and snacks (or help your child to do so), you can avoid the binge eating which usually means immediately-satisfying high-caloric foods which have little or no nutritional value. Eat fruit or raw vegetables during the day instead. www.ChooseMyPlate.gov has some good solid information on nutrition, without information on the latest fad diet.



Kaelyn Magee as the Snow Queen in “The Nutcracker”

As well as maintaining good eating habits, many dancers — including professionals — find it necessary to supplement their training and rehearsal schedules with other forms of exercise. Melody Mennite is a convert to

cross-training and finds that going beyond the obvious Pilates workout helps her to maintain her stamina better for those brutal evening-length ballets. Alumni Bonnie Costa and Kaelyn Magee have both been gym-goers for years. Kaelyn did not have a natural ballet body, and found that half an hour on the tread mill daily helped her burn fat and calories faster as the day went on, as well as increasing her stamina. Kaelyn is now a svelte dancer with Ballet Arizona, and has performed the coveted role of Odette in “Swan Lake” as a principal dancer with Utah Regional Ballet, which brings up the difficulties of partnering to the equation of a young woman’s dancing life ...

PARTNERING (PAS DE DEUX WORK)

Often a difficulty of being a female dancer is that your natural weight will not be optimum for performing — or rehearsing for any length of time. Imagine Kaelyn's partner, who in the second act of "Swan Lake" had to pick her up over his head and maneuver lifts and landings over and over again in just one run-through of the ballet. This sounds difficult enough, without even the mention of the artistry that good partners have to have: making the difficult lifts look effortless plus all of the other strenuous activity that partnering adds to the upper body of a male dancer. Also, today's standards of ballet demand the same long and beautiful lines of its men that it does of its ballerinas. So this means that while a male dancer has to be physically strong and adept enough to partner his ballerinas, he cannot be built like a 49ers linebacker. He too must be lithe and limber and have a long line. Classical Ballet is definitely one of the most demanding of the performing arts, in every way.

Director Diane Cypher remembers a ballet she enjoyed dancing choreographed by Ron Cunningham, in which her partner had to lift her over EIGHTY times. The ballet was less than 20 minutes long. So, at five feet eight inches tall, to preserve her partner's back, she had to maintain the leanest weight she possibly could to get through the rehearsals and performances of the ballet. Diane's partner took her out for cheesecake following the last performance. Interestingly, Robert Kelley, also in this same ballet, had to lift his partner somewhat fewer times, but it was the ballet he remembers as being the most demanding of his stamina, ever, including full-length ballets such as "Swan Lake". Yikes. So, Robert not only

remembers carbo-loading for that ballet, but remembers it being tricky because his costume was ecru tights and a silk shirt . . . something you can't hide a linebacker physique in.



Alumnus Lucien Postlewaite exhibits the lean line of a principal dancer.

HEALTH IS MOST IMPORTANT

Again, in these formative years your body is building muscle and bone mass, which will serve you for the rest of your life, as will building the healthy habits that you form as a young student. The more organized you can be, the better your habits will probably be. Make sure you always have fresh fruit and vegetables and whole-grain crackers available for snacking, and avoid empty calories. Good habits will benefit your whole family, including your parents. We love a win-win situation!



Santa Cruz Ballet Theatre and The Studio alumni Melody Mennite and Lucien Postlewaite starring in SCBT's 2008 production of "The Nutcracker".

Photo of Kaelyn courtesy of Utah Regional Ballet; photo of Lucien and of Melody & Lucien by Lynne Owen.