



Strains, Sprains and Tears- Oh MY! ***How to Prevent Dance Injuries Throughout Your Season***

By: Kelly Cooper, A.T.C., C.S.C.S

Kelly Cooper is a state director for Universal Dance Association in the West Region. She is the former captain for the National Champion Long Beach State Dance Team, and former coach and choreographer for the National Champion UC Davis Dance Team. Kelly is a Certified Athletic Trainer and a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, and currently serves as the Sports Medicine Coordinator for a high school program in California.

Dance injuries can be frustrating and disheartening for the dancer, coach and the team. Knees and ankles are most commonly affected, but with more acrobatic routines and rules loosened involving partnering and lifts, injuries can be a nagging by-product for dancers. Muscle strains and overuse injuries can also be a concern, particularly because dancers have not one, but three seasons!

There are some preventative measures that can be taken to reduce the incidence of these injuries, the first of which is developing a year-long plan for conditioning and training for the dance team season. Listed here are some specific ways teams can work to reduce the likelihood of some of the most common dance injuries:

- Overall conditioning- Most injuries occur towards the end of practice, when dancers are tired and finding easier ways to get through a routine as their muscles fatigue. Scheduling practices longer than 3 hours without a snack and refresh break can be a huge risk. It is important for coaches to recognize when their dancers are tired and plan accordingly, either with more breaks or moving from full out dancing to mental marking, conditioning or barre work. Coaches and captains should also work to incorporate a conditioning plan into their practices every day, whether running, dancing through a routine several times with little rest, or doing strength training at some point during the practice. For teams that take a break during the summer (aside from their UDA camp of course), it may be a great idea to develop a weekly conditioning plan for the dancers to do on their own to help give them a head start for the season.
- Core strengthening- The core supports nearly every movement, from leaps to lifts, stalls to fast pom work. Without the core being properly engaged, other smaller muscles must do the work alone, leading to joint sprains and muscle strains. It is important to note that the core is not just abdominal muscles, but muscles of the back, glutes, hip flexors and shoulder stabilizers as well. Exercises targeting these areas are important to incorporate in every practice- once the dancer understands how to use their core when working, you will not only see a reduction in their injuries, but an improvement in their dance technique as well. Planks, crunches, pushups, back bridges and “Superman’s” are great exercises to start with.

- Ankle training- The ankle is essentially held together by ligaments and tendons and takes a beating when dancers are landing their jumps and leaps, particularly towards the end of practice, when their muscles are fatigued. Proprioception (knowing where the body is in space) training is a great way to train the ankle how to land from these skills and how to correct itself when it starts turning under as it typically does when a dancer sprains their ankle. Standing and balancing while in passé position, moving into releve on one foot, and practicing saute's with a full point and proper landing are good ways to work on ankle strengthening.
- Strength training for dancers- Without sufficient strength in the arms or legs, many dancers attempting lifts or tricks will rely on ligaments to hold their joints together during these movements. It is important to spend time before attempting these more difficult skills to work on increasing the strength of the muscles involved. Squats (or plie's!), pushups, shoulder raises, bicep curls, tricep dips, battements, calf raises- specific strengthening exercises are an important part of every program!
- SAFETY and spotters- Before attempting new lifts and partnering skills, be sure to be on a forgiving practice surface, have plenty of spotters trained in how to prevent falls, and be sure everyone is aware of their role in the lift before attempting it. Be sure all dancers are able to do their part of the lift (can your supporting dancers lift at least half of the executing dancers weight above their head?) before attempting the choreography.
- And finally, REST when needed- Giving your dancers opportunity to rest after a busy week in dance team season is an important part of keeping them healthy, as well as allowing time for injured dancers to recuperate.

It may take a lot of planning, and a bit of time away from choreography, but investing in your dancers health will pay huge dividends all year round!