Waltz on, stay strong

Associate Professor Dafna Merom, of the School of Science and Health, is leading a team that has been awarded funding to investigate whether dancing can prevent falls in older people. The project, supported by the National Health and Medical Research Council, will test the effectiveness of a 12-month program of folk and ballroom dancing in reducing the risk of falling and the physiological risks of falls.

‘Falls are one of the most common health problems among older people and too frequently will lead to loss of independence and poor quality of life,’ says Dr Merom. ‘The most consistent predictors of falls are abnormal gait and poor balance. An accepted strategy for falls prevention is formal exercise, particularly programs that include balance training. But repetitive exercise training can be very boring. What if we could be having fun while doing a preventative health regime? One group of older people is already doing that. Social dancers have superior balance and gait characteristics compared with their non-dancing peers of the same age. Dance is “holistic” in a similar way to the mind-and-body workout of tai chi, which has been found to reduce the risk of falls by more than a third. A dancer must use coordinated multi-directional movements, maintain rhythm with the music and a partner, learn and memorise a sequence of steps while concentrate on the instructor. Dance is also enjoyable.’

Dr Merom’s project will involve retirement village residents doing dance classes twice a week for a year. Their progress will be compared with a control group who will undertake the dance program at the end of the study. Evaluation of the dancers and non-dancers will include a battery of physiological testing, a monthly “fall diary”, quality of life and health and neurocognitive tests that are indicative of risk of recurrent falls.

It is estimated that by 2051, in NSW alone, older people with fall-related injuries will account for more than 440,000 public hospital bed days a year. This study will assist in the formulation of best practice recommendations for fall prevention and determine if dance can also ameliorate age-related cognitive decline.

Older Australians may feel inclined to join dance classes because it was part of the fabric of life in their youth. Dance as a community-based approach to fall prevention offers older people an opportunity for greater social engagement, thereby making a major contribution to healthy ageing mentally and physically.

Project Title: The effectiveness of social dancing as a strategy to prevent falls in older people: a cluster randomised controlled trial
Funding has been set at: $585,378
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February 2014
NHMRC ID: 1028593