



Hypermobility in Dancers: The Risks and Management

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Abstract

Hypermobility or Joint Hypermobility Syndrome is defined as an increased range of movement in the joints, considering the individuals age, gender and ethnic background. While some degree of hypermobility for dancers can be beneficial, such as the visual aesthetics of dance, excessive dancing along with a greater range of joint mobility can increase the risks of injuries for the individual, which is often overlooked and poorly managed in the dance community. Without proper strengthening, hypermobility can lead to chronic pain, joint instability, and heightened risk of injury, for the individual, particularly in physical activities, such as dance. The condition is more commonly seen in females, with symptoms typically beginning in childhood and continuing throughout adult life.

This paper provides an overview of JHS and outlines guidelines for both the identification and management of the condition, using research evidence. The Beighton Score is one of the most widely used tools for assessing generalised joint hypermobility and plays an important role in diagnosis. For dancers, effective management of JHS often includes strength training, and physical therapy. While progress may be slow, and there may be setbacks, with the appropriate support and conditioning, hypermobile dancers will be able to build the necessary joint stability and muscular control to continue dancing safely in a supportive environment.

Introduction

Hypermobility in dancers can be a positive attribute in terms of the visual quality of dance, but can negatively impact dancers such as increasing the risk of injuries. In addition, flexibility and mobility are important aspects for the aesthetics of performing certain sequencing of the body, but with a greater range of joint mobility, hypermobile dancers are at higher risk of injury and commonly suffer from discomfort in the joints throughout long periods of training and performance. Moreover, dancers can be diagnosed with hypermobility syndrome with several tests, such as the Beighton Score Test. By understanding the diagnoses, strength training and body awareness can be implemented within dance training to help avoid injuries and to help manage these negative effects.

Defining Hypermobility

Dancers are known to be flexible and to perform unordinary shapes and sequences of the body, and hypermobility indeed helps the dancer perform these movements in an extraordinary way, however, hypermobility causes a higher risk for injury. Hypermobility and flexibility are both related to the human body's joint's range of motion. Flexibility, however, refers to the ability of

the muscle and connective tissues to lengthen and stretch, which allows the joints to move within a normal or slightly extended range, which can be gained through frequent/accumulation stretching and strength conditioning. On the other hand, hypermobility or General Joint Hypermobility is “a condition of having an unusually or abnormally great range of movement in a joint or joints,” (Oxford Languages and Google - English, 2020) Hypermobility is the mobility of the joints, where the joints extend beyond the normal range due to loose ligaments and connective tissues which will lead to instability. Flexibility is generally known to be beneficial towards dancers and athletes, but hypermobility can increase the risk of injuries if not well managed with strength conditioning and stability exercises

Testing for Hypermobility in Dancers

A dancer may not realise that they have generalised joint hypermobility, but oftentimes it is when they are injured that they realise, and are diagnosed. Generalized joint hypermobility in dancers can be tested in multiple ways, including qualitative questionnaires, range of motion tests, and structured interviews. (Milanese et al., 2019) Considerations in testing for hypermobility include the age, gender and ethnic background of the subject (Simmonds & Keer, 2007). The most utilized hypermobility test is the Beighton Score which assesses generalized joint hypermobility. It consists of 5 tests that score from a range of 0 to 9. The tests include bending the pinky finger backward, touching the thumb to the forearm, hyperextending the elbows and knees, and bending forward to place the palms flat on the floor while the legs are straight. If the individual's score is 5 or higher, it typically indicates hypermobility. However, the Beighton Score helps identify joint flexibility, but does not diagnose syndromes such as Ehlers Danlos Syndrome or Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder.

Injuries

Hypermobility can lead to several different physical issues in dancers, especially if it's not properly managed. In dance training, flexibility and achieving certain “lines” of movement are praised within choreography and technique, as they are idealistic for both young dancers and professionals alike. This can cause many dancers to over train their bodies until they reach the often ideal aesthetic of dynamic and excessive ranges of motion. One major concern is joint instability, which will increase the chances of dislocations, which are most common in the shoulders, knees, thumbs and ankles. Hypermobile dancers may also experience chronic pain and fatigue as well as delayed healing due to excessive movement beyond normal range. Moreover, hypermobile dancers also have a higher risk of sprains due to excessive movement beyond normal range and frequent stress put on the body. A study conducted by Oxford Academy shows that participants with generalized joint hypermobility (GJH) experienced lower physical fitness levels, an increase of fatigue, and greater risk for psychological distress (Scheper et al., 2012). Moreover, the dislocation of joints are found mainly among hypermobile dancers, demonstrating that dancers generally have a higher risk of dislocations, sprains to the ligaments in the hip, knee, and ankle (Tay, 2020b). This is because dancers with hypermobility have a greater range of mobility, creating an easier access for injuries at the joints. Additionally, without proper training and strengthening, a dancer who is diagnosed could sustain a decrease in their physical and performance abilities.

Seeking Professional Guidance

Generalized joint hypermobility may include many risks such as dislocation and a greater risk of injury, but by referring to a physical therapist, it could help support the dancer who experiences generalised joint hypermobility. By visiting a physical therapist, it will allow the dancer to gain insight on their body's needs, as well as provide a thorough evaluation of the muscles, and joints to determine if the hypermobility is severe (Appleton, 2022), while also providing exercises to help certain issues, such as postural issues, correct muscle imbalances, train core musculature, and teach self-corrections (Appleton, 2022), or even tape, brace or use compression garments in class for the joints. Proprioception will help protect the joints while training (Appleton, 2022), but for severe hypermobility, there might be required medication or ongoing medical management. By exercising with physical therapists and their given drills, it will also help the dancers maintain and improve strength and stability, which will further help reduce the risks of pain or injury. Physical therapists can help with different areas of weaknesses and help design individualized exercises to help target these issues, which depending on the exercise, will determine the amount of time spent on these given activities. Moreover, these exercises also “depend on which injuries or health conditions you have and which area of your body needs help moving better.” (professional, 2024b)

Strength Training

In addition, when an individual has been diagnosed with generalized joint hypermobility they will be more likely to sustain injuries. However, there are ways to prevent injuries from generalized joint hypermobility, such as training muscular imbalances, optimizing alignment, and learning how to stabilize the joints within a higher range of motion that dance requires. (Chatfield & Krasnow, 1996) By strengthening the muscles around the hypermobile joints, it will help provide additional stability. In dance classes, a common way to help strengthen a dancer's core is through sit ups, v-ups, and planks. Additionally, it is also helpful to consider using lunges to help strengthen the glutes which could help dancers jump higher, as well as allow a softer and controlled landing so no damage is done to the ankles or knees of the dancer, while also improving technique and artistry. Overall, if an individual is diagnosed with generalized joint hypermobility, they need to start strength training to prevent or reduce the risk of injury and help them improve as a dancer or any other athletics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while hypermobility can help enhance a dancer's performance, it still increases the risk of injuries through joint instability. These injuries can often be prevented through strength training and physical therapy, which is why it is essential that dance education and professional training programs include deeper understanding of hypermobility, along with proper injury management strategies, and proper strengthening methods. Educators should be able to identify hypermobile dancers and adapt training to support joint stability, as well as encourage safe movement patterns, and ensure long-term dancer health. Therefore, it is important to consistently strength train, dance with proper technique, visit a physical therapist, and improve control. By focusing on the dancer's body and not just the aesthetics of the dance, it will help protect the dancer as well as improve their performance abilities.

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