TuSalud

Dance Improves Cognitive Function in Older Latinos

Participation in dance classes consistently improved working memory in Latinos 55 and older.

July 8, 2022 By Laura Schmidt

Dance is a fun and effective exercise for all ages. Now, findings from a recent study suggest that older Latinos who commit to a regular dance practice may improve cognitive function.

Latinos ages 55 and older who participated in a Latin dance program for eight months significantly improved their brain health and working memory—the ability to retain small amounts of information while performing other cognitive tasks.

The dance program BAILAMOS (Balance and Activity in Latinos, Addressing Mobility in Older Adults) incorporated merengue, salsa, bachata and cha-cha styles.

Susan Aguiñaga, a professor of kinesiology and community health at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the lead author of the study, said that because dance is a cognitively challenging activity that requires memorizing steps and sequences, it can improve cognitive function.

“It’s an appealing type of physical modality,” Aguiñaga, who has been involved with BAILAMOS since the program launched, said in a news release. “Older Latinos are drawn to Latin dance because most of them grew up with it in some way.”

For the first four months, participants met twice a week for group dance sessions taught by a professional instructor. Later, classes were led by a “program champion,” a dance student who showed combined skill, enthusiasm and leadership qualities.

Researchers observed participants’ working memory regularly and administered questionnaires to determine how often and vigorously participants were engaging in physical activity on a regular basis.

In the first few months, little improvement in cognition was observed. It wasn’t until the eighth month that researchers saw significant improvement in working memory based on tests.

“That’s probably one of the most important findings—we saw cognitive changes after eight

months, where participants themselves had been leading the dance classes during the maintenance phase," Aguiñaga said. "All of our previous studies were three or four months long. The take-home message here is we need longer programs to show effects."

To learn more about cognitive function in Latinos, click here "Combo of Obesity and Heart Disease May Cause Cognitive Decline in Latinos."

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