

Do You Know.....how to protect knees in dancing?

By Kaye West

... that, according to the American College of Rheumatology, more than 790,000 total knee replacements are performed each year in the United States? And this number is expected to increase as the population ages. This includes many in our dance community, including mine.

Some total knee replacements may be avoided by knowledge of how our knees work, perhaps not for ourselves, but certainly for those who come after us.

The knee joint is like a hinge which bends the knee in one direction and as we walk the knee should move straight forward above the toe. When that does not happen, the hinge joint is compromised, a bit at a time, just as a faulty gate hinge can be compromised when it is slightly off-kilter until it finally fails completely.

Therefore, early in life youngsters should be advised to make sure that their feet point straight ahead when they walk. (Have you noticed that some adults tend to walk with their toes pointed outward and a few walk pigeon-toed with their toes veering toward each other? Very likely this is a carry-over from learning to balance themselves when learning to walk.)

My own problem began in the 1980's when at a weekend event I was taught to do "Rumba walk" with my toes pointed outward. Dutifully, I followed instructions, and practiced intently stepping with my feet pointed outward, and consequently my knee **not** going straight over my toe! By the end of the weekend my right knee (especially) was terribly sore and I had to wear a brace for years. Later, when taking ballroom lessons, I discovered that the teaching had been from partial information! One doesn't step with the feet turned out, but rather the feet turn out as a **result** of how one walks to depict the character of Rumba.

Let me explain.

In regular walking (which is like that done in rhythms like Waltz and Fox Trot) the feet are placed on two parallel *tracks* which remain about the same distance apart with each step. The hip does move slightly forward (it slants) as each forward step is taken. In Rumba, the hip motion is *exaggerated* to make a great deal of forward motion (slanting a great deal) while simultaneously keeping the other foot on the floor as long as possible. To make this happen, the *track* that the foot is placed on comes very close to the track of the standing foot. The result is that the outside edge of the ball of the walking foot *automatically* hits the floor first and the standing foot *automatically* swivels on the floor, resulting in the toes momentarily one-fourth of a turn out from one another, and the knee of the walking leg continues to move directly above the toe.

In other words, if one considers just the placement of the toes as the steps are taken, without considering the narrowing of the tracks because of the exaggeration of the hips, one has the potential of injuring the knee. In contrast, using the hips as described (while keeping the shoulders appearing to remain stable... which involves the *feel* that they move *in opposition to the hips*), is the key to the other elements of foot placement occurring without having to think about them!

The second error which compromised my right knee was my attempts to do large oversways. When I extended my head way beyond my right foot, it strained my knee joint, and eventually I

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experienced the same pain as back in the '80s. I consulted my ballroom coach to discover that I could increase the *appearance* of the oversway without compromising my knee joint if I keep some of my body weight on my left foot (essentially, I lift my left hip). This creates the appearance of a slightly greater slant of my body (with my head not extending too far beyond my right leg). My head weight is *counterbalanced* by the hip allowing weight to remain partially on my left foot.

And I have discovered yet a third culprit: knees can be injured when partners do not coordinate their timing well,

I wish I had known these practices before I damaged my knee to the point of collapse, and I hope the information might help others escape knee surgery!