



Response from the Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancer Health:

The Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancer Health, a group of health care professionals from many of North America's leading dance companies, is compelled to comment on recent mention of dancer weight by a well known dance critic. The critique unprofessionally stated that two principal dancers were overweight rather than focusing on their performance, artistry, musicality or line. We agree with Jennifer Edwards' response in the Huffington Post: this comment degrades not only the work of the dancers, but the art of cultural criticism. Commentary of this nature does nothing to educate, inspire, or bring about innovation in the field. Additionally, we fear this criticism aimed at dancers' shape or eating habits will be damaging to the decades of good work being done by dance companies and their associated health care teams in promoting healthy, injury free dancers with healthy dietary habits.

Relative thinness is a necessary part of life for the professional dancer, especially the female ballet dancer. Ballet is a visual art form where line is a key component. We emphasize, however, the word "relative." Of great concern is the danger of dancers becoming too thin when the keen competition of professional ballet is combined with the unfortunate bias in our culture for women to be extremely thin. The dancer must manage the rigorous training demands while avoiding disordered eating practices. Additionally, professional dancing involves long hours of rehearsal and performance requiring significant energy intake and expenditure. These principles are clearly outlined in the recently updated Taskforce consensus paper Guidelines for Professional Dance Companies on Healthy Nutrition (https://www.danceusa.org/uploads/Dancer_Health/resources_Nutrition_Guidelines.pdf).

The deleterious physical and emotional effects of trying to perfect the "perfect" appearance while tolerating the demands of dance are well documented. Disordered eating, menstrual irregularities, and decreased bone health are all potential health risks that can lead to infertility, chronic injuries, and psychological stress. Published estimates reveal that up to 70% of female athletes suffer from disordered eating, a pattern of aberrant and unhealthy eating behavior. Medical studies conclusively show that injury rates are higher in dancers and athletes with disordered eating.

Comments on dancers' weight not only have no place in a dance critique, but such statements further the stereotype that dancers must be skeletally thin.

In addition it has been medically documented that disordered eating in dancers can be a direct result of suggestions made to the dancer by teachers, directors, peers and certainly critics. Within the broad requirement for good line, we should celebrate the beauty in dancers of different builds, be that womanly, athletic, petite, tall, or waif-like.

In summary, it is important in professional dance, especially ballet, to discourage the ultra-thin body ethic. However, as the medical professionals involved in the care of professional dancers, we recognize the aesthetic demands of ballet in particular and the expectation for dancers to be relatively thin. To ignore this fact simply encourages dancers to deal with nutritional issues in secret and on their own. We, the Taskforce on Dancer Health, view this as an opportunity for a call to action from all stakeholders in dance to achieve the dancer aesthetic in a manner that promotes overall good health and protects the artist and performer.

Sincerely,

The Dance/USA Taskforce on Dancer Health

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