

## **Warming Up**

A proper warm-up is essential before every ballet class. Warming up is not necessarily restricted to stretching, however. Warming up elevates body temperature, making the muscles more pliable and resistant to injury.

Many ballet instructors start the warm-up with light prances for a couple of minutes. With your feet parallel, slowly and gently alternate raising and lowering your heels. Keep your knees soft and make sure you roll through your entire foot, including the toes. Prances can be done in place, moving forward, or moving backward.

Another good way to warm up for ballet is to perform rises at the barre. (Keep a tennis ball in your ballet bag for this one.) Stand at the barre with your feet parallel. Place a tennis ball between your feet, just below the ankles. Try to keep the ball in place as you slowly raise and lower your heels. Rises with a tennis ball will ensure that your body is properly aligned and ready for the class.

### **The students that just arrive for the class**

Every ballet class has them...the dancers who arrive just as class is beginning, scurrying to find a place at the barre while pulling on their slippers and adjusting their leotards. While these latecomers aren't necessarily late, they would benefit more from the class if they were to arrive a few minutes early in order to warm up and stretch.

A pre-class warm-up and stretch is important for increasing and maintaining flexibility. Ballet technique requires long, lean muscles...these muscles can become tight if they are not properly stretched. Even though most ballet classes begin with a long, slow routine at the barre, stretching a bit beforehand is important for preventing tiny muscle strains and small tears that could keep you from improving your technique later in the class.

Do your body a favour by allowing time for a proper warm up and stretch before class. A few minutes will make a significant difference in the quality of your dancing.

There are many ways to improve your stretching. The first way seems simple, but is not easy to do...you need to stretch every day. Not only should you stretch before and after dance class, but you should perform some sort of stretch routine each day, perhaps upon awakening in the morning or before going to bed at night. With stretching, more is better than less. (Of course, never stretch to the point of pain, and never force a stretch on an injury.)

### **Stretching into the splits**

As for your splits, these really take time. Splits must never be forced, as overstretching easily pulls the muscles in the legs. In order to get down to the floor in a split, you have to gain flexibility in your hamstrings as well as your back. Slow, easy stretches seem to be most effective. Never plop right down into a split position...ease your way down, lowering yourself slowly without bouncing. Concentrate on relaxing the area you are stretching, push into it slowly and gently.

A great time to stretch is after class, after you are warmed up. Muscles are most receptive to stretching after they are warmed up. Use this time to your advantage. You'll be surprised how much it will help your flexibility.

Finally, try not to compare your flexibility to that of other dancers. Some people seem to be naturally more flexible than others, without as much effort. With a little self-discipline, however, you too will have your splits. Set small goals for your flexibility and reward your efforts.