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Dancing through menopause

Editor, Pam Brook explores why Scottish country dancing is a particularly beneficial, holistic option for menopausal women, weaving in clinical evidence and vivid personal reflections.

Navigating menopause often means facing physical shifts, emotional turbulence, and the challenge of maintaining a fulfilling, active life. Amid popular fitness programmes, Scottish Country Dancing (SCD) emerges as a particularly compelling option—offering a blend of aerobic exercise, functional fitness training, social connection, and joyful movement. Here's what the evidence and real voices reveal.

Meeting exercise guidelines through engaging movement

A clinical study focused on sedentary postmenopausal women aged around 63 found that just two 75 minute SCD sessions per week, incorporating five traditional dances, yielded heart rates averaging 72 ± 7% of HR_{max}—a level that meets current moderate-intensity aerobic exercise recommendations.[1] Following the intervention, participants showed improved cardiorespiratory fitness: their heart rates during the Chester Step test decreased significantly, signalling a stronger cardiovascular system.[2]

Crucially, these sessions were well attended—with 89 ± 13% adherence—highlighting Scottish Country Dancing's appeal and sustainability. [2]

For busy midlife women juggling responsibilities, an enjoyable form of exercise that actually draws you back week after week can prove invaluable.

Functional fitness that counters the effects of ageing

Sebastian Wanless is the Chair Elect of The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS). He said: "Scottish Country Dancing's signature sidesteps, hops, twirls, and frequent changes in direction offer more than flair—they challenge agility and balance in ways that conventional activities like walking, yoga, or swimming do not."

In a comparative study by Strathclyde University of active women in their 60s and 70s, those participating in Scottish Country Dancing retained the functional fitness of younger women—performing equally →

well in walking speed, mobility, and flexibility. In contrast, similarly active non-dancers experienced age-related decline.[3]

This suggests that Scottish Country Dancing helps delay locomotion-related deficits, making everyday tasks—like crossing the road, climbing stairs, or getting up from a chair—easier and safer.

Benefiting body composition and cardiovascular health

Although the same four-week Scottish Country Dancing study didn't alter body weight or body fat appreciably, it did reduce waist circumference—a key marker of cardiovascular risk—even without significant weight loss.[4]

More broadly, dance routines—including Scottish Country Dancing variants—are linked to improved lipid profiles, body composition, functional fitness, and self-esteem in postmenopausal women.[5] Combating central excessive body fat (adiposity) and improving cholesterol levels are critical measures in reducing long-term health risks.

Mental health, emotional well-being, and the power of group dance

Dance isn't just exercise—it's dance therapy in motion. A systematic review and meta-analysis of dance interventions for perimenopausal to postmenopausal women revealed significant improvements in depression, anxiety, vitality, interpersonal relationships, and somatization.[6] These psychological gains were consistent even when interventions were under three sessions per week or under 1,800 minutes in total, suggesting even modest dance regimens help.

Further reviews emphasise that dance (especially moderate intensity, culturally grounded styles) may also support hormonal balance, bone density, muscle mass, and pelvic health, helping to ward off osteoporosis, sarcopenia, and urogenital decline.[7] The protective effect against osteoporosis in particular is related to the repeated impact loading which this kind of dance engenders. Dance of this type is advocated by the Royal Osteoporosis Society.[8]

Such benefits extend beyond physicality—dance uplifts mood, sharpens cognition through memorising steps, and fosters emotional connection in a communal setting.

What women say: Community, joy and belonging

Beyond peer-reviewed studies, the voices of dancers themselves add heartwarming texture:

"I spent the weekend dancing with 120 other people… Classes are fun and challenging… the live music transports you to another time and place."

"I love how different dancers move… even when we mess up it's funny. No one gets mad… we all help each other."

Debra McAlees, a member of the RSCDS's Health Strategy Working Group shared her personal view: "I have experienced the anxiety and mental fog associated with menopause. SCD proved beneficial in alleviating these symptoms by reducing anxiety levels through the enjoyment of the activities involved.

"Notably, I found that stress levels during classes or dances were significantly lower upon exiting the venue. Additionally, the exercise component of SCD contributed to improved sleep patterns, as I would typically fall asleep after attending classes or dances.

"Furthermore," she added: "the hot flushes, which are common during the menopause, were not a concern as you all get hot whether you are experiencing symptoms of the menopause or not!"

These types of reflections underscore the community spirit, inclusivity, laughter, and vitality that Scottish Country Dancing brings—elements often missing in sterile gym routines or solo workouts. This social balm is especially potent during midlife transitions, offering emotional nourishment alongside physical gain.

Why Scottish Country Dancing excels for menopausal women

Pulling it all together, the table below highlights what makes Scottish Country Dancing especially valuable for menopausal women.

Scottish Country Dancing provides	Benefit
Aerobic, moderate-to-vigorous cardio	Meets weekly exercise guidelines and improves cardiovascular fitness.
Functional, multidirectional movements	Preserves agility, balance, and mobility—key for independence.
Reduces waist circumference	Lowers CVD risk even without weight loss.
Lower limb impact loading	Protects against osteoporosis
Supports psychological health	Alleviates anxiety, depression, boosts vitality and social well-being.
Group and culturally rich	Enhances enjoyment, adherence, and a sense of belonging.

RSCDS welcomes all

As Sebastian told Menopause Matters: "Growing a vibrant worldwide community of Scottish Dance and Music" is what the RSCDS is all about.

"We are keen to open our doors to all ages and provide great support for anyone who wants to take that first step onto the dance floor. You'll find folk from aged 18 to 85 at our groups!

"You don't need a partner as dancers generally take a different partner for each dance. This adds to the social nature and means you can get the opportunity to meet all sorts of different people."

In case you were wondering...

- **You don't need to be Scottish!**
- **You don't need a kilt!**
- **You don't need to learn the dances by heart!**
- **To find a branch near you go to www.rscds.org**

So, if you fancy taking that first step onto the dance floor...you may not only find a new source of fun but could well be improving your all-round health. Any form of dance is great exercise of course – but who knew that Scottish Country Dancing has that extra edge?

Have fun! MM

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