



## THE DANCER DIET

**Marianka Swain** gets some expert nutritional advice

**I**f you do an OK job with training and diet, you get OK results – you make a final, you come second,” observes world Latin champion turned coach Corky Ballas. “But Olympians win gold in one-millionth of a second, and it’s the same for dancers: unless you’re going to do a great job and find that extra advantage, you might as well stay home.”

“Nutrition is absolutely essential,” agrees Ruth Crosby of Good Choice Nutrition, who’s also a choreographer and dance teacher. “We know how damaging it is when dancers starve themselves, and we’re much better at tailoring to the individual. Everyone’s body reacts differently, so while one dancer might suffer from muscle pain, another doesn’t, and we all have different metabolisms and reactions.”

Sports dietitian Dr Nancy Clark works with

coaches to integrate nutrition into training: “Performance doesn’t start with training; it starts with fuelling. Don’t be tempted into a fad diet or copy someone else. Get a proper consultation so you can figure out your energy needs and

what fits your lifestyle. Weight is a delicate issue for dancers, but short cuts are devastating – you can’t out-train a bad diet.”

The most important thing is organisation, believes Nancy: “A lot of dancers are too busy

to eat at the right time, or they grab whatever’s to hand. Plan meals for every four hours, so breakfast, two lunches and dinner. The mid-afternoon lunch is key – if you try to hold off till dinner, you end up snacking. It’s better to refuel so you can maintain the quality of your training



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late in the day.”

If you have to snack, Nancy recommends nuts, cheese, fruit or energy bars, but warns that while fruit is hydrating, it’s not sustaining for everyone. “Experiment and find out what works for you. Avoid the vending machine and no midnight snacks – eat when your body needs it most.”

Ruth suggests six small meals, “as your body takes time to digest, and you often want to get back on the floor as soon as

possible. It also helps maintain your blood sugar balance, rather than gorging, getting an insulin spike and then a slump.”

Corky’s careful dieting was considered strange, “but it worked – I was winning titles in my thirties, which is old! I tell my students to be savvy; if you’re not at your optimal level, you’re going to get your ass beat. I’ve gotten in tune with my body, and I can feel the difference.

“In the morning, I’ll have steamed broccoli, lemon juice and miso soup, for lunch raw

vegetables, almonds, romaine lettuce and olive oil, dinner grilled halibut with pesto, tomato and avocado salad. And it’s not just the ingredients – it’s how you combine them. A hamburger takes three days to digest, including while you’re sleeping, so that’s the equivalent of running ten miles for your digestive system. No wonder you wake up tired!

“Competitors used to eat a lot of red meat, but it doesn’t process easily – if I saw my rivals eating it, I knew I had them in the bag, because I’d have more stamina... there are better ways to get what your body needs to give you that edge on the floor.”

He also loves juicing, “which is a lot easier now; you can buy one with, say, carrot, apple, kale, wheatgrass and ginger to drink between rounds. Avoid sugary

juices – ten tablespoons of sugar immobilises the immune system for 24 hours, so you’re more susceptible to colds and allergies.”

**T**he raw-food diet is great for vitamins and minerals, but some bodies can’t manage it,” warns Ruth. “Complex carbs are great, like whole grains, brown rice and pasta, some lean meat for [vitamin] B12, and during competitions, bursts of protein, like nuts or half a banana. Protein takes longer to break down, so it’ll sustain you.”

Nancy suggests a high-protein breakfast – “eggs, cottage cheese, leftover chicken, baked beans” – and “front-loading” by eating more calories earlier in the day, “but you do need protein and carbs in every meal to give your muscles a constant infusion. Feed your body with premium

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**Corky Ballas**



nutrition like you would a car with premium petrol – it's your key tool as a dancer."

"You also need supplements when you're putting your body under strain," advises Ruth. "It's hard to ingest the amount you need normally without gaining weight. Fish oils are important – even if you're not feeling pain, the cells in your body get inflamed – and

magnesium is good as a muscle relaxant if you suffer from cramps."

Nancy disagrees: "Many foods are more effective than supplements – a tiny piece of broccoli or half a pepper gives you vitamin C for the day, and you get better Omega-3 through fish than pills. However, you might have to top up your vitamin D if you're training indoors

or add to your iron intake, particularly female dancers."

Corky takes Omega-3 and -6 capsules for brain food: "It's not just about the body – you need to remember choreography and react in a millisecond on the floor. The whole dance world is waking up to the fact that this is unmissable." Nancy adds: "When you're educated about the

best choices, that's an investment not just in your professional dance development, but in a long, productive life. It's a no-brainer!" ●

### Food for thought

*Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook* is out now: [www.nancyclarkrd.com](http://www.nancyclarkrd.com)  
 Good Choice Nutrition: [www.goodchoicenutrition.com](http://www.goodchoicenutrition.com)