

DANCER HEALTH TIPS FROM UAB SPORTS & EXERCISE MEDICINE

Understanding and Managing Shin Splints in Dance

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Shin pain is one of the most common complaints I hear from dancers, especially during the start of a new season, an intensive rehearsal period, or after a sudden jump in training. Many dancers brush it off as “just shin splints.” From an Athletic Trainer’s perspective, that mindset can be risky.



Medial Tibial Stress Syndrome (MTSS), commonly known as shin splints, is a warning sign. It’s the body’s way of telling us that something in the training load, technique, or recovery plan needs attention. MTSS usually presents as pain along the inner (medial) border of the shin bone (tibia) that develops gradually with activity. Unlike a single traumatic injury, shin splints are an overuse condition, caused by repetitive stress exceeding the body’s ability to adapt.

In dancers, this stress often comes from:

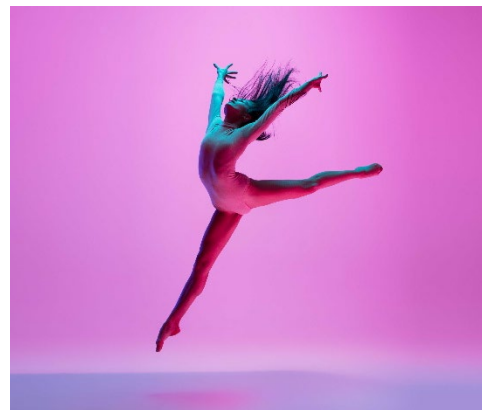
- Repetitive jumping and landing
- Sudden increases in rehearsal hours
- Hard or unforgiving studio floors
- Limited recovery time between classes and performances

From a clinical standpoint, MTSS sits on the bone stress injury spectrum. Left unaddressed, it can progress to a tibial stress fracture, which requires significantly more downtime. Usually, MTSS is described as a dull, aching pain along the inner shin, and it can be tender to touch.

Why are Dancers at Higher Risk? In dancers, common contributing factors to MTSS include:

- **Training Errors** – Rapid increases in class or rehearsal volume, returning too quickly after time off, or rehearsing jumps and traveling sequences excessively
- **Biomechanics & Technique** – Poor shock absorption during landings, limited ankle dorsiflexion affecting plié dept, overpronation or collapse through the foot and ankle, and fatigue-related technique breakdown late in rehearsals
- **Strength and Load Capacity** – Weakness or endurance deficits in the calves, limited hip and core control affecting landing mechanics, muscles absorbing force that bone cannot handle alone
- **External Factors** – Hard or spring-deficient floors, inadequate footwear outside the studio, or low energy availability and inadequate nutrition

The best way to manage shin splints is to immediately manage the load on the dancer. Temporarily modifying jumps or altering training schedules or rehearsal days can prove to be most beneficial. If those are not options, adjusting class intensity can be a backup. The athlete should work with his or her athletic trainer to address mechanics or muscular imbalances that may be contributing to the pain. Once symptoms improve, dancers should follow a graded return-to-jump progression rather than immediately resuming full choreography with plenty of stretching and ice in between.



My advice to all dancers is not to ignore the pain! The last thing a dancer wants is a stress fracture, so let your athletic trainer or another medical professional know if you think you have Medial Tibial Stress Syndrome.

Is there a dancer health related topic you want to learn more about? Or maybe you have a specific question? Send those to us via email (rachel@alabamadancecouncil.org) and we will try to answer them in future articles.

About the Author



Ashley Williamson is a certified Athletic Trainer with UAB Sports and Exercise Medicine. She has been certified for 10 years and has experience working with high school, collegiate, and professional athletes, both able-bodied and adapted. She graduated from the University of Alabama with a Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training and then completed a Master of Science in Healthcare Administration from UAB. Currently, Ashley serves as Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery.

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