

# EXERCISING THE OPTION

*To jump or not to jump, the great aerobic debate*

**P**ICTURE JAMIE LEE CURTIS in "Perfect," sleek, sexy, half-naked, jumping and pulsating to a frenzied disco beat. Until recently, that image epitomized aerobic exercise.

Now, though, it's not so trendy to whip yourself into a frenzy in the service of thinner thighs, tighter buttocks and a healthier heart. Exercise has gotten a bit more sedate with the advent of low-impact aerobics, a revamping—some would say an overhaul—of traditional aerobic techniques. "High impact is passé," sneers one low-impact instructor. "There's no reason to hop around unless you're going to enter a hopping contest."

Though descriptions vary, most New York instructors agree that low-impact means gentler movements, with the feet kept closer to the ground. The idea is to

stave off injury, while still working the heart.

Because low-impact is so new, it means different things to different instructors. There are no accepted definitions, and the technique even goes by different names, including soft or controlled or non-impact aerobics. But despite the confusing terminology, you'd probably recognize a low-impact class if you saw one. Instead of jumping jacks, hopping, running in place and high leg kicks, there is sliding, lunging, leg lifts and leg swings. There are also walking moves and dance steps, sometimes combined in a short sequence. Often there is fast footwork or wide, strong movements for the legs and torso, and lots of arm work, sometimes with wrist weights.

Though low-impact aerobics is supposed to eliminate the persistent injuries associated with high impact, the new technique hasn't been embraced by everyone. Many avid aerobicists

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BY JUDITH ZIMMER





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## AEROBICS

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don't want to give up the high-energy level or the rigorous cardiovascular workout of a stirring traditional class. And some aerobic instructors who have considered re-evaluating their high-impact, high-stress moves are discouraged by clients who aren't interested in change. "It's partially the industry's fault," says Andes Belle, director of the aerobics program at the Printing House Fitness Center. "We've sold everyone on high-impact aerobics and now we have to sell them on low."

Sherry Ferrante of the Sherry Ferrante Fitness Program disdains jumping—high or low. "All you're doing (in low-impact aerobics) is transferring the stress to the outside or the inside of the weight-bearing joints. Regardless of where it falls, the stress isn't beneficial. What the industry should do is cut out the aerobics completely and concentrate on alignment and isometrics." Ferrante offers a vigorous workout based on isometrics, isotonic (stretching), barre, free weights and calisthenics. She also provides exercise bikes for aerobic value.

High injury rates, perhaps more than anything else, was the catalyst in the low-impact revolution. Constant pounding on hard surfaces led to injuries of the joints (feet, ankles, knees, hips) and other stressed areas (shins, spine, lower back). A year ago, studies reported in *Physician and Sports Medicine* magazine indicated that 75% of teachers and 65% of students suffered at least one injury due to high-impact aerobics.

Instructors at The Body Design by Gilda studio on the 43d floor of a Garment District building had a graphic demonstration of the heavy toll exacted by high-impact aerobics. The studio faced eviction because its classes caused the 42 floors below to shake and vibrate. "We were fined every time the floors moved," explains instructor/manager Bonnie Moss. "So we really had to think about what we were doing and find a new way of exercising. And then everyone started talking low impact."

Experts believe that just as some people are more suited to running than others, some are better suited to low-impact than high-impact aerobics. Instructors trying to sell their wares don't always explain that you

need to find a class that challenges your cardiovascular system, that the same low-impact class will be a thorough workout for one person and not sufficiently challenging for another. "Low impact fulfills a need for a different kind of consumer," explains Lori Pollan of the Pollan and Austen Fitness Center. "High impact is for very fit students."

Either way, the bottom line is that you're not fit unless your heart is fit. Aerobic activities—which also include running, swimming, biking and cross-country skiing—are the only ones that will condition the heart and lungs, fight against cardiovascular disease and burn calories. (Besides cardiovascular training, most aerobic classes also provide an overall body workout that includes strengthening exercises for the upper body, abdominals and legs.)

**T**he way to determine how hard your heart is working during class is to do one or more pulse checks. To take your pulse, place three middle fingers on the throat or wrist. Count how many times your heart beats in 15 seconds and multiply by four.

That pulse rate should be compared with what physiologists call the target heart rate—the range at which your heart can be safely exercised. This figure is a percentage of the maximum heart rate, computed by subtracting your age from 220. Someone who is out of shape and just starting to exercise should work at 60% to 70% of their maximum heart rate; well-conditioned people at 80-85%. Example: A 30-year-old has a maximum heart rate of 190. If she is just starting to exercise, her target heart rate should be between 114 and 133; if she is well-trained, the rate should be 152 to 162.

Staying within your target heart rate means you are exercising at the right level of intensity. If you go beyond it, you will start to feel very tired and your muscles will start to hurt. When this happens, you've reached the anaerobic threshold, where your body is no longer working aerobically but has switched to a high-intensity, short-term energy-producing system (used in sprinting) where the muscles don't use oxygen.

At this point, you are no longer exercising the heart and burning fat.

The common ground for all aerobic activities is that you don't stop and start; the point is to keep moving continuously. Experts maintain that, to benefit the heart, you need an aerobic workout of at least 20 uninterrupted minutes. If you have to stop after 10 minutes in a traditional, high-impact class, you may find that you're able to continue low-impact moves longer. Overweight, out-of-shape people or large-breasted women who are uncomfortable with jumping moves may also have better endurance in a low-impact class.

To supplement the aerobic segment, many low-impact instructors use wrist weights to develop upper body strength and bring the pulse rate up. One- or two-pound weights are not considered hazardous, though cautious physiologists warn that using weights to elevate the heart rate during aerobics could raise the blood pressure, which is dangerous for people with hypertension. (For more specific information, consult your physician.) In addition, if you don't use the weights in orthopedically



PHOTO BY BOB MURRAY

**Low-impact moves: The same class will be a thorough workout for one person and insufficient for another.**

correct movements, you could put pressure on the shoulder joints or strain ligaments.

"First, understand how to use your body when you're learning a new pattern of movement," urges Nancy Burstein, president of Fitness Plus, Inc., who recommends that

students master the techniques in a new class for two to three weeks before picking up hand weights.

Ironically, one of the best things to come out of the low-impact revolution is safer high-impact classes. Many instructors no longer encourage students to jump as high as they can, emphasizing, instead, speed of movement—or alternating traditional moves with low-impact steps.

In addition, floor material, one of the causes of impact injuries, is now of concern to many instructors. Concrete floors are harder on the joints than floors that give and absorb shock. The Pollan and Austen Fitness Center has a sprung hardwood floor; others have padded surfaces. And aerobic participants have learned to ask what kind of floor they'll be using.

Aware of the hazards of traditional classes, many view low-impact as a fitness alternative that weeds out beginning students from advanced. In Lisa Levine's advanced aerobics class at Yorkville Fitness Center, the aerobic segment of a class often lasts from 35 to 45 minutes, a killer for many beginning and

intermediate aerobic enthusiasts. Levine's advanced students are well-conditioned athletes or runners who need an extended aerobic segment that will challenge their capacity: They have to keep moving for that long before they benefit.

Levine often discourages newcomers from taking her class; if they insist, she advises them to drop out of the aerobic routine after 15 minutes. Levine believes that high impact is not for everyone, and that students should stress their bodies only as much as they are able.

Still, Lori Pollan suggests that devotees of aerobic exercise should accept some level of risk, as other sports enthusiasts do. "Impact aerobics has gotten a bad name, and a lot of it is deserved," she says. "(But) it's like so many other activities. You can play tennis and get tennis elbow. You can horseback-ride and fall off. Running is stressful. Those are the consequences. But there's always that love for the sport." □

*Judith Zimmer is co-author of "Take It To The Limit" (Rawson), a book about mental and physical endurance.*