

Basic Core Exercises For SCD – At Home Practice

Dancers are encouraged to practice gentle core and leg strengthening exercises outside of class to improve general fitness and flexibility, building upon the lessons learned during classes. Such gradual improvements to core strength and fitness will reduce the likelihood of muscle fatigue or injury during a class or social dance.

Due to COVID19 restrictions, many dancers are unable to attend classes or dances, and any at-home classes can often focus on only a limited part of the repertoire. Therefore, to keep movement and core skills, and in preparation for the return to classes, the below exercises are suggested to reduce the chance of loss of muscle or flexibility in the interim – particularly in older dancers where “keeping going” may be becoming more important, or in newer dancers who may not have fully developed the key skills prior to lockdown.

These exercises are based on class warmup exercises and can be done accompanied by music. Ideally, practice these exercises every other day if you can, and at least once a week. There are 5 exercises, with some common variations.

Ensure you are in a safe space with plenty of room to move and a non-slip surface. You are responsible for your own safety here. RSCDS Manchester accepts no responsibility for any injuries incurred whilst attempting these exercises. Make sure you understand the exercise before attempting it.

Exercise 1: The Grand March (Easy)

The objective of this exercise is to strengthen ankles and feet (remember, most SCD is done “on the toes”, not on flat feet), and also strengthening calf muscles for the “dip” or “reach” part of a strathspey travelling step.

1. With the feet parallel to each other, march on the spot for 8 steps, on flat feet
2. Rise onto the toes, keeping an upright posture (look forwards not down!) and march again for 8 steps
3. Return to the “normal” flat feet and march for 8 steps
4. Bend the knees a little whilst keeping balance and good upper posture, and march for 8 steps
5. Return to the “normal” flat feet and march for 8 steps

Repeat the sequence at least three times more (4 times in total). Ideally in time with the music.

Variation a: Where space allows, complete the exercise walking in a straight line or around a large room (or flat path or park if it’s not slippery underfoot).

Variation b: For a more complete workout, raise the arms above the head and “march” using the same or opposite arm to working leg for some or all of the exercise. Mind the lampshade.

Exercise 2: The “Clamshell” External Hip Rotations (Moderate to Hard)

The objective of this exercise is to increase the mobility of the hip and strengthen the muscles in your bottom (the gluteus minimus and gluteus medius) which are responsible for rotation of the leg required for “turnout” (yes, it’s your bum that does the work, not your knees!). These are often quite under-utilized muscles in normal life and should be strengthened for dancing.

Find something static to hold on to for this exercise – the back of a dining room chair or the kitchen worktop, for example.

1. Begin standing with your feet parallel to each other.
2. Starting with the right leg, slide your right foot up your left leg until your heel is level with the middle of your lower leg, toes pointing downward to the floor, knee bent in front of you
3. Keeping the foot where it is against your left leg, slowly rotate your right leg from the hip so your knee swings out to the right at about 40-50° - activate those bum muscles to do this.
4. Keeping the hip, knee and upper leg where it is, slowly straighten the lower leg and foot out (to aerial 4th position).
5. Slowly lower your whole leg until you are standing back on two feet, feet parallel.
6. Repeat on the other leg

Repeat this exercise 3 more times on each leg. You should feel the muscles in your bottom working to achieve this exercise. Aim for a slow but continuous movement throughout.

Variation a: Do this exercise lying down on your side, but keep your heels together and only do steps 3-5 above, holding each step for 2-3 seconds. Turn onto your other side to repeat with the other leg.

Variation b: If a 40-50° angle becomes too easy in step 3, challenge yourself by attempting a 60-75° angle or even a 75-90° angle. Just be aware of your body’s limits and don’t force it. The important part is the activation of the correct muscle group, not the angle of rotation.

Variation c: If you have good balance, let go of the chair and work on your balance and core posture at the same time.

Exercise 3: Gentle Pliè (Moderate)

The objective of this exercise is to further strengthen the ankle and calf muscles, whilst also having a degree of “turnout”. It is recommended to complete exercise 1 and 2 above immediately before this exercise as a “warm up”.

You may wish to hold onto a chair back or worktop for this exercise.

IMPORTANT: Wherever any “turnout” is involved, you must activate the muscles in your bottom (your “glutes”) and upper leg to rotate the whole leg. Newer dancers often incorrectly attempt to rotate out just the lower leg from the knee, resulting in knee injuries over time.

1. Stand in First Position (heels together, legs and feet “turned out” by 45° or as much as you can manage)
2. Slowly bend at the knee (keeping your knees over your toes) down into a shallow pliè for a count of 2, keeping the core upright (don’t lean forward)
3. Straighten back up to 1st position for a count of 2
4. Rise onto your toes for a count of 2
5. Return to first position for a count of 2
6. Repeat three times (down for 2, up for 2, up for 2, down for 2, etc.)

There is no need to “hold” any part of this exercise – aim for a slow but continuous movement.

Exercise 4: Standing Up Straight for 32 bars of Strathspey (Easy)

The importance of simply standing up straight is not to be underestimated. Most back, hip and neck problems (in life, not just dancing) result from sustained incorrect posture. Take time each day to actively and consciously stand up properly. Not only does this help your back, it improves your balance and allows your lungs to expand to their full capacity when you breathe in – reducing “out of breath” or sluggish feelings. It may also help relieve any mental tension and improve your mood.

1. Stand up as straight as you can
2. Lift your chin until it is parallel with the floor/ceiling so you are looking straight forwards or very slightly upwards
3. Lift your shoulders up and then slowly roll them backwards and downwards into a natural position
4. Consciously “tuck your bottom under” (activate the gluteus maximus muscle in your bottom and pull in your lower abdominal muscles to rotate the top of your hips slightly up and back) – you may feel a slight but not uncomfortable pull or tension in these muscles as they work.
5. Take a deep breath in, allowing your ribcage to expand as much as it can, without arching your spine or losing posture.
6. Allow yourself to slowly exhale, again without losing the posture.
7. Remember to smile (I was bound to throw that in somewhere!)
8. Continue to stand in this position and simply breathe until 60 seconds (32 bars of strathspey) are up

Repeat this exercise at intervals throughout the day.

Note, if you have been hunched over a desk or computer all day you may find you experience some mild back pain between the shoulder-blades or the lower back. This is likely to be from tense muscles getting used to the “proper” posture again, and should stop after a few repetitions of this exercise, but if it is unbearable stop the exercise and try again later. If the pain is severe or continuous then you may need to have a DSE (Display Screen & Equipment) assessment done on your workstation or to consult your GP.

Exercise 5: Revise the Foot Positions (Easy to Moderate)

Being able to place your feet in the correct foot positions (without looking at your feet) needs to become second nature if proficiency in SCD footwork is to be achieved. Whilst most of us don't have room to practice our skip-change at home (although you can in the park if it isn't slippery), we can all revise the foot positions easily at home.

Note: If you are unsure of the SCD foot positions, there are plenty of good quality Youtube videos demonstrating these. Be aware that they are slightly different from ballet so make sure to watch SCD videos (e.g. by the RSCDS or affiliated branches).

Hold each position for 2-3 seconds before moving on.

1. Stand in **1st position** (Stand upright, heels together, legs and feet turned out from the hips to 45°).
2. Move your right leg into **2nd Position** (Keep the turnout, translate your right foot to the right until feet are shoulder width apart).
3. Move your right leg into **3rd Position** (Keep the turnout, translate your right foot back to the left so your right heel touches your left instep or ball of the left foot).
4. Move your right leg into **4th intermediate position** (translate your right foot diagonally forwards and right at 45° to your left foot, toes just touching the floor).
5. Return to **3rd position**
6. Move your right leg into **4th (forwards) position** (take your right foot forwards to directly in front of you, toes just touching the floor whilst maintaining the turnout from the hips).
7. Return to **1st position**.
8. Bring your right leg back to **4th rear position** (straight back with the toes just touching the ground, activating the bum muscles to avoid leaning forwards).
9. Return to **1st position**.
10. Repeat with the left leg

Repeat the above sequence twice on each leg (3 times total). Ensure the upper body maintains an upright posture throughout to help improve core strength (try to do the exercises by "feel" not by sight).

Variation a: For a more fluid exercise, repeat the sequence without pausing between the different positions – 8 positions in 8 bars of music, or faster if you like. Remember to maintain upper body posture and try to "place" your feet rather than scrape them along the floor.

Variation b: To shake things up a bit, once you've got the hang of the above sequence and variation "a", try this alternative order (1st, 4th forwards, 3rd, 4th int, 3rd, 2nd, 1st, 4th rear, 1st, repeat on the other leg). Remember to maintain upper body posture and try to "place" your feet rather than scrape them along the floor.

Variation c: For the more experienced dancer, try either variation "a" or variation "b" but on the 2nd repetition move the "same arm and leg" together, and on the 3rd repetition move the "opposite arm to working leg" – it's harder than it looks, and a giggle when it inevitably gets muddled, but it does get your brain working too.

Bonus Exercise (Easy to Moderate)

This is a “listening” exercise rather than a physical exercise.

The tunes for all RSCDS dance books are available on Spotify (free with adverts), Spotify premium and Itunes, as well as in CD format. You can also listen to many tunes on Youtube (without necessarily watching the dance being performed) or shows such as “take the floor” on the radio or on Iplayer catch-up to do this exercise.

1. Read the “how to guide” on telling jigs and reels apart - available as a downloadable pdf file on the RSCDS Manchester website, put your music/playlist on shuffle and get practicing.
2. Alternatively, revise the teaching mnemonics that accompany the footwork and vocalize/mentally practice along to some of the tunes and get your brain to tune into the rhythm, even if you have no room to practice the steps at home (could be quite hard if the tune is very fast):
 - a. Skip change (“hop-step-close-step”),
 - b. Pas de bas (“spring-beat-beat-point” or “pas-de-bas-jettè”),
 - c. Strathspey travelling (“reach-close-step-through” or “dip-step-dip-through”)
 - d. Strathspey setting (“side-close-side-hop” or “step-together-step-hop”)
 - e. Similarly for advanced steps such as Glasgow Highlanders step, Highland Schottische, etc.)
3. Or, just enjoy the music and let it relax you.