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**Are you Ready for Zumba?**

Beto Perez brings Latin rhythms to spice up that boring workout  
by Zoie Clift

Even if you haven't made it to a class yet, chances are you've heard of Zumba®. As one of the largest fitness programs in the world, there are over 13,000 Zumba trainers worldwide and the workout is practiced in over 35 countries.

The foundation of Zumba, which is Colombian slang for "fast," is that of a dance-aerobics fueled by pulsating Latin and other international music. The workout mixes traditional Latin dances like salsa and merengue with cardiovascular moves to create a complete workout.

Celebrity fitness trainer, "Beto" Perez, created the fitness routine in Colombia in the mid 1990s. About to teach a class one day, he forgot the tapes he normally used. So, he replaced them with Latin music tapes he found in his car and improvised the class. From this, the roots of Zumba were created. A few years later, Beto brought the class to Miami, where he was approached by local entrepreneurs Alberto Perlman and Alberto Aghion and helped create a global company based on the workout's fitness philosophy.

So what can someone who has never been to a class expect at their first session? "To smile the entire time," said Perlman, CEO of Zumba Fitness, based in Hollywood, Fla. "To experience music from Latin America and all over the world including salsa, merengue, belly dancing, reggaeton, hip-hop, cumbia and even flamenco. To forget that you are working out and feel like you are at a nightclub in South Beach."

The message is that working out doesn't have to seem like "work." "Getting people to start exercising is extremely difficult," said Josefa Simkin, MD, a family physician based in Watsonville, Calif. "However, many, many people love to dance. The real trick to a successful exercise program is to be able to keep to it; if it is fun, it is almost unavoidable."

Music is Zumba's special motivational ingredient. The score is created with specific beats and tempo changes to transition the workout from one toning, strengthening or cardio move to another. The workout, which requires no special equipment or clothing, starts with a warm-up and ends with a cool-down. A fusion of music that alternates between up□ tempo and slow rhythms fuels the dancing. It targets every major muscle group in the body, pushing the heart rate up to optimum calorie-burning zone and bringing it down again to keep the body at a sustained level of high performance.

"It is easy to follow and is a workout that is good for all age groups and spans all ability levels," said Dr. Gari Rucker, a pediatrician and partner with Arkadelphia Clinic for Children and Young Adults in Arkadelphia, Ark. "The pace is kept relatively fast so that you keep your heart rate up and are working out aerobically. The steps are easy to follow and the footwork is fun. I have recommended Zumba to my younger overweight patients that need a cardio workout but are not [ready] to work out on a treadmill, elliptical, etc."

The workout also provides a versatile exercise option for recovering patients, such as those recovering from breast cancer. According to Carolyn M. Kaelin, MD, MPH, Founding Director of the Comprehensive Breast Health Center at Brigham and Women's Hospital of Harvard Medical School, and author of *The Breast Cancer Survivor's Fitness Plan* (McGraw-Hill, 2006), numerous studies have shown that exercising regularly has an impact on overall quality of life, mood, and possibly even breast cancer recurrence and survival.

For example, when a Harvard study of 120,000 female registered nurses looked closely at 3,000 participants who had been diagnosed with breast cancer, the researchers found that even modest activities, such as walking 3 to 5 hours a week, lowered the odds of recurrence and improved survival compared with being less active or sedentary. "For some of us, walking is a tad too mundane," said Kaelin. "Zumba delivers an energizing moderate to vigorous aerobic workout packed with variety, color and creativity. Certainly, these classes could be combined with other activities to help people get the exercise they need. It has other advantages, too. The moves are a great way to enhance flexibility and range of motion in the arms, which can be impaired by surgery and other treatments."

By 2006, there were over 2,000 Zumba instructors worldwide and millions of instructional DVDs sold, and the phenomenon continues to grow. Zumba Fitness® has aligned with AFAA, ACE and IDEA, among others, to introduce Beto's creative program to their members across the U.S. "It transcends the traditional world of fitness," said Perlman. "Right now we have people doing Zumba in fitness facilities, in schools, at churches, hospitals, orphanages, and more. We even have a couple of instructors going over to prisons and teaching. It is only half about fitness; the other half is about letting go, feeling energized, interacting with people, and getting into the music. There are a lot of people using the workout to overcome things in their lives. I guess it frees their bodies and frees their minds somehow; maybe it's the way you experience music in the class. It's very unique. I think we still have a lot of empty rooms we can fill with Zumba."

**Zoie Clift** is a freelance health and fitness reporter. She has written for *Runner's World*, *Marathon & Beyond*, *Running Times*, *Scuba Diving*, *Trail Runner* and *VeloNews*.