



Pleasure principle

Meet Nia: the new feel-good workout regimen

First there was yoga, then Pilates. Now, in-the-know fitness lovers – including hard-bodied Hollywood stars such as Famke Janssen (*Nip/Tuck*, *X-Men*) – are discovering the latest in fusion fitness: the Nia technique.

Short for neuromuscular integrative action, Nia combines elements of dance, martial arts and the healing practices. In classes offered at upscale gyms, private studios and the occasional church basement, barefoot participants stretch, sway and shimmy to rhythmic music, working up a sweat almost without noticing. The moves, while playful and simple to learn, are deceptively efficient at toning muscles and burning calories. It's a group-oriented workout, making it prohibitive to some privacy-obsessed celebs, but as devotees such as designer Donna Karan have discovered, Nia's emphasis on expressiveness and pleasure make it the most sensual mind-body workout around today.

The technique was developed in the early 1980s by Debbie and Carlos Rosas, fitness experts in Portland, Ore., with an interest in holistic health. "Nia is an alternative to traditional workouts that emphasize just the body and give no room for personal growth or self-expression or self-healing," says Debbie. "You learn about yourself and your body at the same time as you're getting a workout, and you're able to take that information outside the gym and improve the quality of your life." Nia draws on nine different traditions, a rich trove that includes the fluid postures of tai chi and the quick, forceful movements of taekwondo, sexy jazz routines and imaginative modern dance. Yoga and other mind-body arts add a spiritual aspect to the workout.

Forget the repetitive movements, barked commands and robotic routines of traditional fitness workouts. In a Nia class, students might do a sexy, hip-shaking cha-cha one minute and an assertive series of karate-style kicks the next. At the teacher's gentle urging, participants will glide about the room to dance, imitate tightrope walkers or even link elbows with a partner and twirl like square dancers. Nia is never boring, and all that variety keeps the muscles challenged and the heart pumping.

Nia at a glance

- 1 Uses whole-body, expressive movement, rather than repetitive jogging or lifting
- 2 Increases cardiovascular fitness
- 3 Boosts strength, flexibility and range of motion
- 4 Improves balance and agility
- 5 Is designed to arouse "the senses, our child within and our inner athlete, warrior and dancer"

Of course, the short "free dance" segments interspersed throughout the Nia workout can make new students a little self-conscious. "When I first started I was mortified," admits Toronto television producer Marni Goldman, 38, who started doing Nia three years ago. However, the relaxed, joyful attitude of her Nia classmates soon set her at ease, and her newfound comfort has spilled over to her social life. "Now I'm not afraid to dance anywhere or any time!"

The toned figures of its instructors and students leave no doubt that Nia can reshape the body. But the imagination gets a workout, too. "Teachers use imagery to engage the emotions," explains instructor Leela Francis of the Vancouver wellness company Vivid Existence. "The minute you put an emotion into an action, your tissues engage in a totally different way." For example, if you try to stand up straight, chances are your shoulders will tense and your neck will stiffen. But if you imagine lifting your face to the sun, not only will your posture improve, you'll get a mini-vacation for your mind.

Can a pain-free workout really yield both a whittled waistline and a better attitude? Nia supporters – as well as celebrity physicians such as Christiane Northrup, a Nia student and frequent *Oprah* guest – believe it can. "Vitality is not something that's supposed to diminish with age," says Rosas. "We can't look like we're 18 again, but we can increase youthfulness, energy, pleasure – we can change the movement of the body."