

Pilates - health benefits

Pilates (or the Pilates method) is a series of about 500 exercises inspired by calisthenics, yoga and ballet. Pilates improves flexibility, strength, balance and body awareness. It was devised in the 1920s by physical trainer Joseph Pilates as a way to help injured athletes and dancers safely return to exercise and maintain their fitness. Since then, Pilates has been adapted to suit people in the general community.

Pilates is a non-aerobic form of exercise. It requires concentration and focus, because the body is moved through precise ranges of motion. Always consult your doctor before embarking on any new fitness program, especially if you have a pre-existing medical condition or have not exercised in a long time.

Benefits of Pilates

Some of the benefits of Pilates include:

- Improved flexibility.
- Increased muscle strength, particularly of the abdominal muscles, lower back, hips and buttocks (the 'core muscles' of the body).
- Balanced muscular strength on both sides of the body.
- Enhanced muscular control of the back and limbs.
- Improved stabilisation of the spine.
- Greater awareness of posture.
- Improved physical coordination and balance.
- Relaxation of the shoulders, neck and upper back.
- Safe rehabilitation of joint and spinal injuries.
- Aids in prevention of musculoskeletal injuries.

Pilates caters for everyone

Pilates caters for everyone, from the beginner to the advanced. You can perform exercises using your own body weight, or with the aid of various pieces of equipment.

A typical Pilates workout would include a number of exercises performed at low repetitions in sets of five to 10, with session lasting up to 45 to 90 minutes. Each exercise is performed with attention to proper breathing techniques and abdominal control. To gain the maximum benefit, you should do Pilates at least two or three times per week. You could notice postural improvements after 10 to 20 sessions.

Pilates challenges the body

Pilates is partly inspired by yoga, but is different in one key respect: yoga is made up of a series of static postures, while Pilates is based on putting yourself into unstable postures and challenging your body by moving the limbs.

For example, imagine you are lying on your back, with bent knees and both feet on the floor. A Pilates exercise may involve straightening one leg so that your toes point to the ceiling, and using the other leg to slowly raise and lower your body. You need tight abdominal and buttock muscles to keep your hips square, and focused attention to stop yourself from tipping over.

Two forms of Pilates

The two basic forms of Pilates include:

- **Mat-based Pilates** – the most popular form of Pilates. This is a series of exercises performed on the floor using gravity and your own body weight to provide the resistance. The central aim is to condition the deeper, supporting muscles of the body to improve posture, balance and coordination.

- **Equipment-based Pilates** – Pilates includes specific equipment including the 'Reformer', which looks like a moveable carriage that you push and pull along the floor. Some forms of Pilates include free weights (such as dumbbells) that offer resistance to the muscles.

Quality is everything

Pilates consists of moving through a slow, sustained series of exercises using abdominal control and proper breathing. The quality of each posture is important, not the number of repetitions or how energetically you can move.

Books and videotapes are available, but seek instruction from a qualified Pilates method teacher or Pilates-trained physiotherapist to get the best results.

General cautions

Although Pilates is a low impact form of exercise, certain people should seek medical advice before embarking on a new program, including:

- Pregnant women
- People aged 40 years or more
- People with a pre-existing medical condition such as heart disease
- People with pre-existing musculoskeletal injuries or disorders
- Anyone who has not exercised for a long time
- Those who are very overweight or obese.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pilates teacher
- Pilates-trained physiotherapist
- Australian Pilates Method Association Tel. (03) 9718 1881
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 739 899

Things to remember

- Pilates (or the Pilates method) is a series of about 500 exercises that improves flexibility, strength, balance and body awareness.
- Benefits of Pilates can include improved posture and increased flexibility, strength, coordination and balance.
- You can perform exercises using your own body weight, or with the aid of various pieces of equipment.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Kinect Australia (inc VICFIT in Victoria)

Copyright © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.