

Pilates - health benefits

Pilates (or the Pilates method) is a series of over 500 mat or equipment based exercises inspired by calisthenics, yoga and ballet. Pilates improves flexibility, strength, balance and body awareness. It was introduced into America 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 can be an aerobic and 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.
- Helps prevent 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 includes a number of exercises and stretches with sessions lasting up to 45 to 90 minutes. Each exercise is performed with attention to proper breathing techniques and abdominal muscle control. To gain the maximum benefit, you should do Pilates at least two or three times per week. You may 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 instance, 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 – 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 – this includes specific equipment that works against spring-loaded resistance, including the 'reformer', which is a moveable carriage that you push and pull along its tracks. Some forms of Pilates include weights (such as dumbbells) and other small types of equipment 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:

- Following recent surgery
- 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
- Accredited Pilates instructor
- Pilates-trained physiotherapist
- Pilates Alliance of Australasia
- Australian Pilates Method Association Tel. (03) 9718 1881

Things to remember

Pilates (or the Pilates method) is a series of mat and equipment based exercises that improve 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.

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Physical Activity Australia

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