

Should You Be Doing Pilates?

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INTELLIGENT EXERCISE

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Over and over again people ask me, “Should I be doing Pilates?” As a consequence, I have been continuously updating my own understanding of the technique and its place in the world of physical activity. And the answer is (as with everything): it depends on what you need and want.

What is Pilates Really?

The hype around Pilates can make it hard to know what the method actually is. Pilates is a system of exercise that emphasizes developing the strength of your core -- the deep stabilizing muscles of your abdomen and back -- while increasing your flexibility by doing a few repetitions of a variety of exercises with a quality of mindful attention. There are exercises that can be done on a mat with no special equipment, and exercises you do on special Pilates machines. You can work in a class or one-on-one with a teacher.

The system was developed by the German bodybuilder, athlete, and gymnast Joseph Pilates. While interned in a prison camp in England during the first World War, Pilates helped condition bedridden internees by adapting ideas from physical culture of that time, including creating machines and exercises that used many parts of the body in coordination rather than isolating muscle groups as current gym-style machines do.

After the war he moved to Germany and then to New York, and the development of his method was closely interwoven with the development of modern dance and American ballet, with dancers forming his early clientele and many of the first generation of Pilates teachers. Using the coordination patterns and aesthetics of dance, Pilates helped dancers excel and non-dancers cultivate a dancer’s elegant form, especially the erect posture, flat tummy, and limberness. So dancers and movie stars kept the method alive and brought it to popularity by the 1990s, when a hunger developed for an alternative to the mechanistic, inattentive style of exercise that typified gym fitness.

Pilates has also found a home in physical therapy settings, since it is a gentle, non-weight-bearing, non-impact form of exercise that can be adapted to the needs of nearly anyone, even those in pain or with sedentary lifestyles. Pilates’ focus on strengthening the deep core stabilizing muscles of the abdomen and back have made it appealing for anyone who would like to stand tall, move more gracefully, or provide specific kinds of support for athletic performance.

Is Pilates Right for You?

Depending on your needs, Pilates might be an excellent choice of exercise. But it can’t, as people

sometimes believe nowadays, do everything -- no form of exercise can. To counterbalance the hype, I'm going to discuss what Pilates can't do first, and then we'll go on to look at its very real benefits.

Here are the major things Pilates cannot do:

- *Pilates does not challenge your heart and lungs much or burn many calories.* A study of the fitness benefits of Pilates mat classes by the American Council on Exercise showed that the cardiovascular benefits and calorie-burning potential of the exercise was equivalent at best to a walk at a moderate pace. That is enough physical activity to reduce your risk for major diseases of aging, including heart disease and diabetes, since these benefits come when you go from no exercise to very mild regular exercise. But it's definitely not enough to make your heart and lungs particularly fit or to help you lose weight.
- *Pilates does not help you get really strong.* To build your strength, you need to work against resistance strong enough to challenge you. At first a Pilates workout may do that, but beyond a certain point you cannot find a continuing challenge.
- *Pilates builds strength for simple movements in the front-to-back plane, and more strength on the front than on the back of your body.* So if you are looking for an exercise system that will directly help you improve your ability to do movements that involve turning and twisting, or if you need more back strength, Pilates will not be the best choice.
- *Pilates doesn't build power (the ability to use strength quickly) or what we can generally call spring.* This is because it involves smooth, flowing movements but lacks impact and quick or ballistic movements. Power and spring are key components of fitness, essential for balance and fall-prevention and especially important for many kinds of sports. You will need to turn to other forms of exercise to specifically build these things.
- *If you are an athlete, Pilates may help you or it may hinder you.* The current vogue of "core strengthening" in athletics needs to be applied in sports-specific ways, so most Pilates is too generic to be of use. Strengthening the deep core stabilizers is a help in athletes who have weakness there, but the buzzword "core stability" is too often mistaken to mean "core held still," which interferes with athletic performance – and with coordination for every kind of person. And it is important to remember that Pilates was developed by a gymnast in collaboration with dancers. It cultivates movement patterns that are appropriate to dance but not necessarily to sports.
- *If you have aches and pains it is important to understand that Pilates does not solve all problems.* If you have severely compromised movement patterns due to pain, or need to make significant changes in posture, coordination, or athletic form and technique, then exercise of any kind – even Pilates – will not do the job. For that you need movement education techniques such as the *Feldenkrais Method*®.

So those are the things you don't get from Pilates. What do you get?

- *Pilates can help you be more flexible, particularly if you're out of shape.* Part of being flexible is having the strength and coordination to support yourself in larger, looser movements. A good Pilates teacher who understands how we use flexibility in life can help you lengthen your muscles while

developing the strength to support your flexibility. This is much more effective and useful than just stretching.

- *Pilates allows you to work on strength and flexibility simultaneously.* In traditional gym-style fitness you usually work on one thing at a time, and sometimes your efforts to develop one will actually hinder the other. For instance, people who lift a lot of weights without concern for flexibility often become tight and musclebound. And on the other hand, if you stretch prior to exercise, you actually weaken your muscles. Pilates helps you develop strength and flexibility in combination, the way you actually need them in your life.
- *Pilates helps you develop a steady internal support in your hips and trunk. And yes, it makes your tummy flatter.* You'll sustain better posture and learn to use the deep core support key to moving with grace or power. Once you are able to find and feel this support, you will be able to bring it into athletic activities and other forms of exercise. So try not to get hung up on just the tummy thing – there's so much more to it than that.
- *Pilates helps you learn to move with more awareness.* The whole point of Pilates is to help you tune into your body for exercise rather than tuning out. This is one of the method's most challenging and enjoyable facets. And if you already feel plenty aware of yourself, such that riding a stationary bike while watching TV seems mechanical and boring to you, you'll probably love Pilates.
- *Pilates will help you relieve stress by moving and breathing mindfully.* It has been shown that physical exercise helps reduce primarily the physiological effects of stress, while meditation reduces primarily the psychological experience of stress. Mindful exercise combines the stress-relieving properties of both for a very broad and powerful effect.
- *A good Pilates teacher is a powerful ally in rehabilitation.* If you have pain or are recovering from injury, Pilates is a wonderfully flexible system of exercise that can meet you at your current level of function, then help you progress safely.

How Do You Find a Good Teacher?

The effectiveness of Pilates depends on the quality of the teacher. When you look for a Pilates teacher, the options are dizzying because the trademark has expired and anyone can say they teach Pilates. So, for starters, look for a teacher with a lot of experience. Also look for one who really starts slowly so you can learn the proper way to do the exercises – this can't be done quickly, and requires a lot of attention from the teacher as well as from you. If you don't feel like you're getting that, look elsewhere, and if the teacher says, "go for the burn," head for the hills.

Some Pilates teachers emphasize holding your torso and hips very still – they call it "the Box," and believe it shouldn't move. That's not core support, that's rigidity. Find a teacher who can help you feel very deep muscle action without stiffening up your whole body, so you feel supported yet free to move.

Other teachers emphasize working with your lower back flattened to the floor – something Joseph Pilates himself taught but our current scientific understanding of the spine tells us is unhealthy. Find a teacher who helps you find and use a "neutral spine," preserving the natural curve of your lower back.

And, most important of all, find a teacher who can truly take your needs into account, whose sessions make you feel great both during and afterwards, and whom you really like to work with.

I've asked Andrew T. Carter, a Pilates teacher and *Feldenkrais Practitioner*[®], to work with Intelligent Exercise because he is exactly the kind of teacher I recommend. Andrew brings an extensive history teaching Pilates together with a *Feldenkrais Practitioner*[®]'s understanding of movement, coordination and the learning experience. **Pilates Synergy**, his own adaptation of the Pilates mat material made in light of the insights of the *Feldenkrais Method*[®], supports more coordinated movement than the traditional form.

"In my teaching of the Pilates Method I not only emphasize stretch, strength, and working from your center, but in addition I focus on a proper balance of effort to increase range and ease of movement."
— Andrew Carter

Andrew is available for individual Pilates mat instruction in your home or office in Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn. No special equipment is necessary. To schedule an appointment or for more information, call 646-256-4414 or email jae@intelligentexercise.com.

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