

# What Is Pilates? - Your Need-To-Know



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## **Table of Contents**

LEGAL NOTICE:.....	2
What Is Pilates?.....	3
The History Of Pilates.....	3
The Benefits Of Pilates.....	6
Pilates Vs Yoga.....	8
Top 10 Pilates Exercises.....	9
The Benefits Of Pilates.....	13
The Disadvantages Of Pilates.....	14

## **What Is Pilates?**

Pilates is a complete physical fitness system that was created by Joseph Pilates in the early 1900's. It aims to develop 6 key areas of your physical fitness which are known as the 'Principles of Pilates' and these are; breathing, concentration, control, center, flow and precision. This article will provide you with a detailed overview of Pilates, its history and its core principles.

### ***The History Of Pilates***

Joseph Pilates studied eastern and western yoga in his early life and practiced many other popular physical training regimes in Germany during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also believed that mental and physical health were directly related and that exercise programs should strengthen both the human body and the human mind. These beliefs and his experiences with the various types of physical training led Joseph Pilates to develop contrology - an exercise program that would enhance a person's mental and physical health and would later become known as Pilates.

Joseph Pilates began teaching contrology in an internment camp on the Isle Of Man where he was detained during World War I. Many of the people he taught contrology survived the 1918 flu pandemic and this is widely believed to be due to their enhanced physical health as a result of practicing contrology.

After World War I, Joseph Pilates returned to Germany and taught his contrology method to police officers. He was later pressured into teaching contrology to the German army and shortly after emigrated to the United States.

Joseph Pilates arrived in the United States during the mid-1920s and then went onto setup a studio in New York City from which he and his wife taught contrology to students until the 1960s.

In addition to his practical teachings, Joseph Pilates authored two books on contrology – *Your Health: A Corrective System Of Exercising That Revolutionizes The Entire Field Of Physical Education* (1934) and *Return To Life Through Contrology* (1945). Many of Joseph Pilates original students also went on to open up their own studios and teach contrology

Today there are two main forms of Pilates – Classical/Traditional Pilates and Modern Pilates. Classical/Traditional Pilates is based around the original works of Joseph Pilates while Modern Pilates adapts these original teachings in various ways which are not endorsed by Joseph Pilates.

### ***The 6 Principles Of Pilates***

In 1980, Gail Eisen and Philip Friedman published *The Pilates Method Of Physical & Mental Conditioning* (1980) which contained 6 principles of Pilates; Breathing, Center, Concentration, Control, Flow and Precision. These principles have now been widely accepted as the foundation of the Pilates exercise system. The section below discusses each of these 6 principles in greater detail:

1. **Breathing:** Joseph Pilates stated that proper breathing was cleansing and invigorating and referred to it as 'bodily house cleaning with blood circulation'. He believed Pilates practitioners should fully inhale and completely exhale during every breath. Each inhale should be directed laterally into the back and sides of the lower rib cage while each exhale should fully engage the deep abdominal and pelvic floor muscles. This breathing technique should be coordinated with each Pilates movement.
2. **Center:** Every Pilates movement starts from the center which is often referred to as the powerhouse. Pilates exercises should flow outward from the center to the extremities.
3. **Concentration:** Staying focused while you workout is essential for Pilates success. Practitioners are encouraged to fully concentrate on what their body is doing while they perform each of the movements, as the way the exercises are completed is more important than the actual exercises themselves.
4. **Control:** Control was one of the driving principles behind the formation of chronology. Joseph Pilates believed that by fully concentrating on each movement you could fully control each muscle in your body and not be at its mercy.
5. **Flow:** Pilates movements are meant to be flowing and graceful and during each workout you should seamlessly transition from one exercise to the next. Every movement should also flow from the center of the body to the extremities.
6. **Precision:** Performing Pilates exercises with precision ensures that you get the maximum benefit from them. Fully concentrating on each movement helps you to master the proper form and also allows you to carry this precision into the movements you perform in everyday life.

## Pilates Apparatus

Pilates workouts involve a combination of mat exercises and exercises that use specially designed Pilates apparatus. This Pilates apparatus uses springs to lengthen and strengthen the muscles in your body, boost your joint flexibility and enhance your range of motion. The section below lists the main Pilates apparatus that is used during the workouts:

1. **Universal Reformer (Reformer):** The Universal Reformer is probably the most popular piece of Pilates equipment. It allows people to exercise in a horizontal plane which helps to reduce pressure on the joints and properly aligns the body without it being affected by gravitational forces. Joseph Pilates developed over 100 movements which could be performed on the Universal Reformer.
2. **Arm Chair (Baby Chair):** The Arm Chair is designed to develop your upper body strength, stability and posture. It allows people to perform a range of arm movements from a seated position.

3. **High Chair (Electric Chair):** The High Chair can be used to perform various lower body exercises and strengthens your leg muscles while also boosting the flexibility of your ankles.
4. **Ladder Barrel (Large Barrel):** The Ladder Barrel aims to enhance the flexibility of your spine and strengthen your core. It can be used to perform a range of abdominal and lower back exercises.
5. **Magic Circle:** The Magic Circle is another well known piece of Pilates equipment and one of the most simplistic tools designed by Joseph Pilates. It provides light to medium resistance and can be used to target your arms and legs.
6. **Pedi-Pole:** The Pedi-Pole is a long pole with two spring loaded handles that can be used to perform a number of different balance, resistance and flexibility exercises.
7. **Small Barrel (Half Barrel):** The Small Barrel is a piece of Pilates equipment that resembles a half barrel. It's designed to support your lower back while performing core and leg exercises.
8. **Spine Corrector:** The Spine Corrector is a versatile Pilates tool that allows you to stretch out your spine while you exercise.
9. **Trapeze Table (Cadillac):** The Trapeze Table can be used to practice a wide range of exercises that target your entire body. It can be used from a lying or hanging position and operated with both your hands and legs.
10. **Wunda Chair:** The Wunda Chair is a small box shaped piece of equipment with a spring loaded pedal on one side. It can be operated with both your feet and hands and is a great choice for strengthening your arms, legs and core.



# **The Benefits Of Pilates**

Pilates is described by its creator Joseph Pilates as the 'method for whole health' and there are plenty of reasons to agree with this statement. This complete physical fitness system tests many areas of your fitness and is one of the most well rounded training tools out there. Keep reading to learn all about the benefits of Pilates.

## **1 – Better Balance**

Many Pilates postures including Control Balance and the Pilates Balance Point directly target and improve your balance. Not only does this enhance your exercise performance but it also allows you to better coordinate your movements during day to day life which makes you more agile and improves your reaction times.

## **2 – Better Posture**

All Pilates movements flow from the core, promote proper skeletal alignment and strengthen your abdominal muscles and spine. This has a positive impact on your posture and helps you avoid back aches, neck pain and other ailments that are associated with poor posture.

## **3 – Core Stability**

The core muscles are the main focus of every Pilates movement with every exercise starting from the center of your body. This makes Pilates one of the best tools available for strengthening and stabilizing the muscles in your abdomen and lower back.

## **4 – Enhanced Breathing**

Breathing is one of the key principles in Pilates with its founder Joseph Pilates believing that proper breathing helps to cleanse and invigorate your entire body and circulatory system. As a result, full inhalation and exhalation are emphasized during every Pilates movement. This strengthens your lungs, deep abdominal muscles and pelvic floor muscles and improves your overall breathing technique.

## **5 – Greater Endurance**

As your breathing improves from practicing Pilates you become able to draw more oxygen with each breath and process it more efficiently. This allows you to exercise for longer and with more energy.

## **6 – Improved Concentration**

People who practice Pilates are advised to fully concentrate on their body's movements during each exercise and focus on the proper form. This high level of concentration on each movement helps to boost your overall concentration in day to day life and makes focusing on tasks much easier.

## 7 – Increased Flexibility

Many Pilates exercises stretch out your joints and muscles and enhance their range of motion. This increases your overall flexibility which enhances the flow of blood within your body, lowers your injury risk and makes it easier to perform many of your daily tasks.

## 8 – Stronger Muscles

One final benefit of Pilates is that it improves your overall strength levels. Every Pilates exercise engages multiple muscle groups and helps to strengthen and tone them. This additional strength has many related health benefits and helps to improve your performance during other exercises and also gives you functional strength which you can apply during your daily life.





# **Pilates Vs Yoga**

Pilates and yoga are two excellent tools for developing multiple aspects of your health and fitness. They share many similarities but also have some important differences. This article will look at Pilates and yoga in detail, compare some of their key aspects and help you decide which one is best for you.

## **1 – Mental Fitness**

While both Pilates and yoga believe that mental fitness is important, yoga has the edge in this area. Pilates develops your mental fitness by focusing on proper breathing and concentration. This helps you become more mentally aware of your body's movements and gives you greater control over them. Yoga takes this a step further by incorporating periods of stillness and meditation which calm your mind, lower your stress levels and allow you to find inner peace.

## **2 – Calories Burned**

An average Pilates class burns through 350 calories per hour [1]. The amount of calories burned during a yoga class varies considerably depending on the style of yoga. For example, a Hatha yoga class works off less than 200 calories per hour on average whereas a Bikram yoga class can blast through over 650 calories in an hour. So if fat burning is important to you, an intense style of yoga is the better choice.

## **3 – Muscles Targeted**

Both yoga and Pilates work all the muscles in your body. However, most styles of yoga give your muscles a much lighter workout than Pilates. In addition to giving your muscles a better workout, Pilates also places more emphasis on your core muscles than yoga with every movement flowing from the center of your body. Therefore, Pilates is the best choice if you want to maximize your core stability and overall strength levels.

## **4 – Flexibility**

Pilates and yoga involve lots of stretching and flexibility exercises. However, yoga generally involves deeper stretches and holding poses for longer. As a result, yoga has a better long term effect on your flexibility than Pilates.

## **5 – Styles**

There are two major forms of Pilates – Classical/Traditional Pilates and Modern Pilates.

Classical/Traditional Pilates strictly adheres to the original teachings of Joseph Pilates whereas Modern Pilates alters these teachings into many different styles. Although there are many different styles of Modern Pilates, Classical/Traditional Pilates is seen as the only true style.

Yoga on the other has a large amount of true styles. Hatha Yoga is the most popular style in the US but there are also lots of other types of yoga to choose from including Ashtanga



Yoga, Bikram Yoga, Fertility Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Power Yoga, Restorative Yoga and Vinyasa Yoga.

## **Top 10 Pilates Exercises**

If you want to boost your balance, improve your strength levels and more, Pilates is a fantastic fitness tool. This article will help you get started with Pilates by providing you with 10 of the best Pilates exercises.

### **1 – Criss Cross**

The Criss Cross is a mat based Pilates exercise that targets your oblique muscles and involves twisting from side to side. To perform the Criss Cross, follow the instructions below:

7. Lie flat on the mat with your knees bent, your feet off the mat, your neck bent forward, your hands behind your head and your elbows pointing outward.
8. Slowly twist your right elbow toward your knees and straighten your right leg, making sure you lift your shoulder blades off the mat as you perform the exercise.
9. Slowly twist your left elbow toward your knees, straighten your left leg and bend your right leg, making sure that you lift your shoulder blades off the mat as you perform the exercise.
10. Slowly twist your right elbow toward your knees, straighten your right leg and bend your left leg, making sure that you lift your shoulder blades off the mat as you perform the exercise.
11. Repeat steps 3-4 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Criss Cross](#)

### **2 – Front & Back Side Kick**

The Front & Back Side Kick is a brilliant mat based exercise for your legs, hips and core. To perform the Front & Back Side Kick, follow the instructions below:

1. Lie flat on your left side on the mat, place your left hand on your head and place your right hand in front of your hips on the mat.
2. Bring your legs forward and then lift your right leg up to hip height.
3. Kick your right leg forward as far as it will go.
4. Kick your right leg backward as far as it will go.
5. Repeat steps 3-4 for as many repetitions as you can manage.
6. Lie flat on your right side on the mat, place your right hand on your head and place your left hand in front of your hips on the mat.
7. Bring your legs forward and then lift your left leg up to hip height.
8. Kick your left leg forward as far as it will go.
9. Kick your left leg backward as far as it will go.
10. Repeat steps 8-9 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Front & Back Side Kick](#)

### **3 – Mermaid**

The Mermaid is another mat based exercise that flexes out your spine. To perform the Mermaid, follow the instructions below:

1. Sit with your knees bent and your legs folded to the right hand side of your butt.
2. Raise your arms straight out to the side until your hands are parallel with your shoulders.
3. Lean over to your left side by bending with your hips, place your left forearm on the mat and straighten your right arm above your head.
4. Lean back up, straighten your body and raise your arms straight out to the side until your hands are parallel with your shoulders.
5. Lean over to your right side by bending with your hips, place your right hand on your right knee and straighten your left arm above your head.
6. Lean back up, straighten your body and raise your arms straight out to the side until your hands are parallel with your shoulders.
7. Repeat steps 3-6 for as many repetitions as you can manage.
8. Sit with your knees bent and your legs folded to the left hand side of your butt.
9. Raise your arms straight out to the side until your hands are parallel with your shoulders.
10. Lean over to your right side by bending with your hips, place your right forearm on the mat and straighten your left arm above your head.
11. Lean back up, straighten your body and raise your arms straight out to the side until your hands are parallel with your shoulders.
12. Lean over to your left side by bending with your hips, place your left hand on your left knee and straighten your right arm above your head.
13. Lean back up, straighten your body and raise your arms straight out to the side until your hands are parallel with your shoulders.
14. Repeat steps 10-13 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Mermaid](#)

### **4 – Roll Up**

The Roll Up is a simple but effective Pilates exercise which soothes your spine and strengthens your core muscles. To perform the Roll Up, follow the instructions below:

11. Lie flat on the mat with your arms straight by your side and your legs straight out in front of you.
12. Slowly lift your arms up off the mat while keeping them straight until your hands are pointing toward the ceiling and parallel with your shoulders.
13. Slowly roll up off the mat by bending at the waist and tightening your core muscles while holding your arms in the same position, stopping once your lower body is upright and your shoulders are slightly rounded.
14. Slowly roll back down to the mat while holding your arms in the same position, stopping when your body is flat against the mat and your arms are pointing toward the ceiling and parallel with your shoulders.
15. Repeat steps 3-4 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Roll Up](#)

## 5 – Single Leg Circles

Single Leg Circles are a top exercise for your legs and core. To perform Single Leg circles, follow the instructions below:

1. Bend your right knee in toward your chest and then straighten your right leg so that it's pointing toward the ceiling.
2. Slowly circle your right thigh into your left thigh, straight down and then back up to the starting position.
3. Repeat step 2 for as many repetitions as you can manage.
4. Slowly lower your right thigh down, circle it into your left thigh and then bring it back up to the starting position.
5. Repeat step 4 for as many repetitions as you can manage.
6. Slowly circle your left thigh into your right thigh, straight down and then back up to the starting position.
7. Repeat step 6 for as many repetitions as you can manage.
8. Slowly lower your left thigh down, circle it into your right thigh and then bring it back up to the starting position.
9. Repeat step 8 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of Single Leg Circles](#)

## 6 – Single Leg Stretch

The Single Leg Stretch is an excellent exercise for loosening up your lower body. To perform the single leg stretch, follow the instructions below:

1. Lie flat on the mat with your legs bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Lift your legs off the ground, bring your knees in line with your hips and then place your hands on your right knee.
3. Stretch your left leg out while keeping your right leg bent and your hands on your right knee.
4. Bend your left leg, stretch your right leg out and put your hands on your left knee.
5. Bend your right leg, stretch your left leg out and put your hands on your right knee.
6. Repeat steps 4-5 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Single Leg Stretch](#)

## 7 – Spine Stretch

The Spine Stretch is a top exercise for boosting the flexibility of your spine. To perform the Spine Stretch, follow the instructions below:

1. Sit up straight on the mat with your legs straight out in front of you and then widen them so that they're a mat width apart.
2. Lift your arms up so that they're parallel with your shoulders, making sure that you keep them straight.
3. Curl your chin forward into your chest, curl your spine forward and hold this position for 5 seconds.
4. After 5 seconds, lift up your chin and straighten your spine.
5. Repeat steps 3-4 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Spine Stretch](#)

## **8 – The Hundred**

The Hundred strengthens and tones lower abdominal muscles and also works your arms. To perform the Hundred, follow the instructions below:

1. Lie flat on the mat with your arms straight by your side and then bend your knees toward your chest.
2. Lift your head, neck and shoulders off the mat and then lift your hands a couple of inches above the mat.
3. Straighten your legs out and point them up in the air at a 45 degree angle, making sure that your ankles are together and your toes are apart.
4. Vigorously wave your arms up and down 100 times, making sure that they remain straight and don't touch the floor.
5. After the 100<sup>th</sup> arm wave, hold the position for 5 seconds.
6. After 5 seconds, bring your knees toward your chest and lower your head, neck, shoulders and feet back onto the mat.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Hundred](#)

## **9 – Toe Taps**

Toe Taps are a brilliant exercise for strengthening your stabilizing your abdominal muscles and your lower back. To perform Toe Taps, follow the instructions below:

1. Lie flat on the mat with your arms straight by your side, your legs bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Lift your left foot off the mat while keeping your left knee bent, stopping when your left shin is parallel with the mat.
3. Lift your right foot off the mat while keeping your right knee bent, stopping when your right shin is parallel with the mat.
4. Lower your right foot down toward the mat while keeping your right knee bent, stopping when your right toe touches the mat.
5. Lift your right foot off the mat while keeping your right knee bent, stopping when your right shin is parallel with the mat.
6. Lower your left foot down toward the mat while keeping your left knee bent, stopping when your left toe touches the mat.
7. Lift your left foot off the mat while keeping your left knee bent, stopping when your left shin is parallel with the mat.
8. Repeat steps 4-7 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of Toe Taps](#)

## **10 – Spine Twist**

The Spine Twist boosts the flexibility of both your hips, spine and upper back. To perform the Spine Twist, follow the instructions below:

1. Sit up straight on the mat with your legs straight out in front of you and your arms pointed straight out to the side.
2. Slowly twist as far as you can go to the right using your waist.
3. Slowly return to the starting position.
4. Slowly twist as far as you can go to the left using your waist.
5. Repeat steps 2-4 for as many repetitions as you can manage.

[Click Here For A Video Demonstration Of The Spine Twist](#)

## **The Benefits Of Pilates**

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Breathing is one of the key principles in Pilates with its founder Joseph Pilates believing that proper breathing helps to cleanse and invigorate your entire body and circulatory system. As a result, full inhalation and exhalation are emphasized during every Pilates movement. This strengthens your lungs, deep abdominal muscles and pelvic floor muscles and improves your overall breathing technique.

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## **8 – Stronger Muscles**

One final benefit of Pilates is that it improves your overall strength levels. Every Pilates exercise engages multiple muscle groups and helps to strengthen and tone them. This additional strength has many related health benefits and helps to improve your performance during other exercises and also gives you functional strength which you can apply during your daily life.

## ***The Disadvantages Of Pilates***

Pilates has many plus points and is an excellent tool for strengthening your body and your mind. However, like with many fitness tools, it does also have its drawbacks. This article will expand on this topic and list the disadvantages of Pilates.

### **1 – It Doesn't Boost Your Cardiovascular Fitness**

Pilates exercises are great for strengthening and toning your muscles and enhancing your flexibility. However, they do very little for your cardiovascular fitness. So if you want an exercise program that will get your heart pumping and strengthen your vascular system, Pilates may not be the right choice for you.

### **2 – It Doesn't Increase The Size Of Your Muscles**

Another negative of Pilates is that it doesn't build up your muscles in the same way that weightlifting does. While it will increase your functional strength and allow you to push, lift and pull with more force, the size of your muscles will remain similar. So if large muscles are important to you, you may favor weightlifting over Pilates.

### **3 – The Name Can Be Misleading**

Many fitness centers claim to offer Pilates classes. However, the name Pilates isn't copyrighted and as a result, many styles of Pilates have branched away from the original teachings of Joseph Pilates and include methods and movements that are not endorsed or approved by him. This means that if you attend a Pilates class, there are no guarantees that you'll be taught traditional Pilates.



## 4 – It Can Broaden Your Waistline

Every Pilates movement engages your core muscles and this constant engagement causes the muscles around your waistline to become thicker and firmer. So if having a slim waistline is one of your main fitness goals, you'll want to limit the amount of Pilates you do or alternatively choose a different style of fitness training.

## 5 – Complex Movements

One final disadvantage of Pilates is that the movements are relatively complicated in comparison to other forms of fitness training. While many of the physical actions look simplistic, coordinating your breathing in time with each movement does take a lot of practice. Mastering both the synchronized breathing and movements is essential for getting the maximum benefit from Pilates exercises and this can take time. So if you're looking for an exercise program that will give you instant results, Pilates may not be suitable for you.

## Summary

While Pilates does have its disadvantages, these do not detract from its many benefits. Additionally, by practicing Pilates responsibly and combining it with other styles of training, you can avoid many of these disadvantages while maximizing your results.

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