

PILATES

Overview

Pilates is a physical fitness system developed in the early 20th century in Germany by Joseph Pilates. Pilates called his method *Contrology* because he believed his method uses the mind to control the muscles. The program focuses on the core postural muscles which help keep the body balanced and are important for providing support for the spine. Pilates exercises also teach awareness of breath and alignment of the spine and aim to strengthen the deep torso muscles.

Pilates dramatically transforms the way your body looks, feels and performs. It builds strength without excess bulk, creating a sleek, toned body with slender thighs and flat abdomen. It teaches body awareness, good posture and easy, graceful movement. Pilates improves flexibility, agility and economy of motion. It can even help alleviate back pain. Professional dancers have known the benefits of Pilates for decades. Top athletes use it for strength, flexibility, and injury prevention.

History

German born Joseph Pilates designed a system of exercise based on aerobics and yoga postures of Surya Namaskaras. Pilates was created during the First World War for the purpose of improving the rehabilitation program for the many returning veterans. Joseph Pilates believed mental and physical health are essential to one another. He recommended a few precise movements emphasizing control and form to aid injured soldiers in regaining their health by strengthening, stretching, and stabilizing key muscles. Pilates created “The Pilates Principles” to condition the entire body: proper alignment, centering, concentration, control, precision, breathing, and flowing movement.

Principles

Pilates claimed his method had a philosophical and theoretical foundation. He claimed that his system was not merely a collection of exercises, but a method developed and refined over more than eighty-five years of use and observation. According to practitioners, the central aim of Pilates is to attempt to create a fusion of mind and body so that without even engaging the mind, the body will move with economy, grace, and balance.

Breathing

Joseph Pilates believed that circulating the blood could awaken all the cells in the body and carry away the wastes related to fatigue. For the blood to do its work properly, he maintained, it has to be charged with oxygen and purged of waste gases through proper breathing. Pilates breathing should be done with concentration, control, and precision. Proper and effective breathing not only oxygenates the muscles, but also reduces tension in the upper neck and shoulders. Pilates attempts to properly coordinate this breathing practice with movement, including breathing instructions with every exercise.

Develop a Strong Core

Pilates exercises develop a strong core, powerhouse or center of the body. The core consists of the deep abdominal muscles along with the muscles closest to the spine. Control of the core is achieved by integrating the trunk, pelvis and shoulder girdle. Traditional workouts tend to build short, bulky muscles – the type most prone to injury. Pilates elongates and strengthens, improving muscle elasticity and joint mobility. A body with balanced strength and flexibility is less likely to be injured.

All energy for Pilates exercises is said to begin from the core and flow outward to the limbs. Pilates technique allows physical energy from the center, or powerhouse, to coordinate and strengthen movements of the arms and legs. Pilates felt it was important to build a strong powerhouse in order to rely on it in daily living.

Pilates Workout

The Pilates mat program follows a set sequence, with exercises following on from one another in a natural progression, just as Joseph Pilates designed them. Beginners start with basic exercises and build up to include additional exercises and more advanced positioning.

Keep these tips in mind so that you can get the most out of your Pilates workout.

Stay focused. Pilates is designed to combine your breathing rhythm with your body movements. Learn to keep your breathing coordinated with the exercises. You will also be taught to concentrate on your muscles and what you are doing. The goal of Pilates is to unite your mind and body, which relieves [stress](#) and [anxiety](#).

Be comfortable. Wear comfortable clothes (as you would for [yoga](#) - shorts or tights and a T-shirt or tank top are good choices) and keep in mind that Pilates is usually done without shoes. If you start feeling uncomfortable, strained, or experience pain, you should stop.

Let it flow. When you perform your exercises, avoid quick, jerky movements. Every movement should be slow, but still strong and flexible. Joseph Pilates worked with dancers and designed his movements to flow like a dance.

Don't leave out the heart. The nice thing about Pilates is you don't have to break a sweat if you don't want to - but you can also work the exercises quickly to get your heart rate going. Or, because Pilates is primarily about strength and flexibility, pair your Pilates workout with a form of aerobic exercise like swimming or brisk walking.

Most fans of Pilates say they stick with the program because it's diverse and interesting. Joseph Pilates designed his program for variety - people do fewer repetitions of a number of exercises rather than lots of repetitions of only a few. He also intended his exercises to be something people could do on their own once they had proper instruction.