

Pilates and yoga - health benefits

Pilates (or the Pilates method) is a series of about 500 exercises inspired by calisthenics, yoga and ballet. Pilates lengthens and stretches all the major muscle groups in the body in a balanced fashion. It improves flexibility, strength, balance and body awareness.

Yoga brings the body and mind together and is built on three main elements – exercise, breathing and meditation. Both yoga and Pilates improve muscular and postural strength.

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.

Pilates explained

In the 1920s, physical trainer Joseph Pilates introduced Pilates into America 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 you move your body through precise ranges of motion. Pilates lengthens and stretches all the major muscle groups in your body in a balanced fashion. It requires concentration in finding a centre point to control your body through movement. Each exercise has a prescribed placement, rhythm and breathing pattern.

In Pilates, your muscles are never worked to exhaustion, so there is no sweating or straining, just intense concentration. The workout consists of a variety of exercise sequences that are performed in low repetitions, usually five to ten times, over a session of 45 to 90 minutes. Mat work and specialised equipment for resistance are used.

The Pilates method is taught to suit each person and exercises are regularly re-evaluated to ensure they are appropriate for that person. Due to the individual attention, this method can suit everybody from elite athletes to people with limited mobility, pregnant women and people with low fitness levels.

Classes are held in specialised Pilates studios, physiotherapy clinics or at your local leisure facility or community centre.

Health benefits of Pilates

The health benefits of Pilates include:

- improved flexibility
- increased muscle strength and tone, particularly of your abdominal muscles, lower back, hips and buttocks (the 'core muscles' of your body)
- balanced muscular strength on both sides of your body
- enhanced muscular control of your back and limbs
- improved stabilisation of your spine
- improved posture
- rehabilitation or prevention of injuries related to muscle imbalances
- improved physical coordination and balance
- relaxation of your shoulders, neck and upper back
- safe rehabilitation of joint and spinal injuries
- prevention of musculoskeletal injuries
- increased lung capacity and circulation through deep breathing
- improved concentration

- increased body awareness
- stress management and relaxation.

Pilates suitable for everyone

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

A typical Pilates workout includes a number of exercises and stretches. 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 and challenging your 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 your 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.

Types of Pilates

The two basic forms of Pilates are:

- Mat-based Pilates – this is a series of exercises performed on the floor using gravity and your own body weight to provide resistance. The main aim is to condition the deeper, supporting muscles of your 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 types of small equipment that offer resistance to the muscles.

Quality in a Pilates workout

Pilates consists of moving through a slow, sustained series of exercises using abdominal control and proper breathing. The quality of each posture is more important than the number of repetitions or how energetically you can move.

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

Pilates and general precautions

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

- people who have recently had 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
- people who are very overweight or obese.

Yoga explained

Yoga is an ancient Indian philosophy that dates back thousands of years. It was designed as a path to spiritual enlightenment, but in modern times, the physical aspects of Hatha yoga have found huge popularity as a gentle form of exercise and stress management. There are many different varieties of yoga, but each one essentially relies on structured poses (asanas) practiced with breath awareness.

Researchers have discovered that the regular practice of yoga may produce many health benefits, including increased fitness and normalisation of blood pressure. Yoga is a renowned antidote to stress. Over time, yoga practitioners report lower levels of stress, and increased feelings of happiness and wellbeing. This is because concentrating on the postures and the breath acts as a form of meditation.

The classical techniques of yoga date back more than 5,000 years. The practice of yoga encourages effort, intelligence, accuracy, thoroughness, commitment and dedication. The word yoga means 'to join or yoke together'. It brings your body and mind together, and is built on three main elements – exercise, breathing and meditation.

The exercises of yoga are designed to put pressure on the glandular systems of your body, increasing your body's efficiency and total health. Breathing techniques increase breath control to improve the health and function of body and mind.

The two systems of exercise and breathing prepare the body and mind for meditation, with an approach to a quiet mind that allows silence and healing from everyday stress. When practiced regularly, yoga can become a powerful and sophisticated discipline for achieving physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

Types of yoga

There are many different varieties of yoga, each with a slightly different slant. The most popular are Hatha, Bikram, Iyengar and Vinyasa yoga.

Asanas or yoga postures

Each yoga posture, or asana, is held for a period of time and linked with breathing. Generally, a yoga session begins with gentle asanas and works up to more vigorous or challenging postures. A full yoga session should exercise every part of your body and should include pranayama (breath control practices), relaxation and meditation.

The different postures or asanas include:

- lying postures
- sitting postures
- standing postures
- inverted or upside-down postures.

Health benefits of yoga

The practice of yoga asanas develops strength and flexibility, while soothing your nerves and calming your mind. The asanas affect the muscles, joints and skin, and the whole body – glands, nerves, internal organs, bones, respiration and the brain. The physical building blocks of yoga are the posture and the breath.

Health benefits of yoga include:

- Cardiovascular system (heart and arteries) – asanas are isometric, which means they rely on holding muscle tension for a short period of time. This improves cardiovascular fitness and circulation. Studies show that regular yoga practice may help normalise blood pressure.
- Digestive system – improved blood circulation and the massaging effect of surrounding muscles speeds up a sluggish digestion.

- Musculoskeletal – joints are moved through their full range of motion, which encourages mobility and eases pressure. The gentle stretching releases muscle and joint tension, and stiffness, and also increases flexibility. Maintaining many of the asanas encourages strength and endurance. Weight-bearing asanas may help prevent osteoporosis, and may also help people already diagnosed with osteoporosis (if practiced with care under the supervision of a qualified yoga teacher). Long-term benefits include reduced back pain and improved posture.
- Nervous system – improved blood circulation, easing of muscle tension and the act of focusing the mind on the breath all combine to soothe the nervous system. Long-term benefits include reduced stress, anxiety and fatigue, better concentration and energy levels, and increased feelings of calm and wellbeing.

Yoga for people of different ages

Yoga is taught in classes, catering for beginners through to advanced practitioners. It is non-competitive and suitable for anyone, regardless of your age or fitness level. Your yoga teacher should carefully guide and observe you, and modify postures when necessary.

An asana should never cause pain. If it hurts, ease back on the stretch or don't do it at all. It is important to keep within your physical limits.

If you are over 40, haven't exercised for a long time or have a pre-existing medical condition, you should check with your doctor before starting any regular exercise routine.

Pre-exercise screening is used to identify people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of experiencing a health problem during physical activity. It is a filter or 'safety net' to help decide if the potential benefits of exercise outweigh the risks for you.

Yoga classes usually have 10 to 20 people, allowing for individual attention. Suggestions for getting the most out of your yoga class include:

- Wear comfortable clothes and take a blanket or mat, since many poses are performed sitting or lying down.
- Allow at least three or four hours since your last meal.
- Always tell your yoga teacher if you have a specific complaint, so they can advise against any asanas that may aggravate your problem.
- Always tell your yoga teacher if you are pregnant, have had a recent injury, illness, surgery, high blood pressure, heart problems or osteoporosis.
- Don't talk during the class because it will disturb your own quiet focus and that of others in the class.

Where to get help

- Your local council
- Physiotherapy clinic, local leisure facility or community centre
- Pilates studio
- Yoga studio
- A qualified yoga or Pilates teacher
- A Pilates-trained physiotherapist
- Smartplay Tel. (03) 9674 8777
- Australian Pilates Method Association Tel. (03) 9718 1881

Things to remember

- See your doctor for a check-up to assess your fitness level before taking up a new exercise program.
- Pilates is a safe and effective method of rehabilitation and exercise that focuses on muscular balance.
- Yoga is an ancient practice that incorporates gentle exercise, breath control and meditation.
- The health benefits of regular yoga practice may include lowering blood pressure, improved posture and circulation, and a sense of wellbeing.
- Find a properly trained and qualified instructor of yoga or Pilates.

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