

The pilates system of exercise

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Pilates is an exercise system named after its originator, Joseph Pilates. Mr. Pilates developed this system in the early 1900's, both to improve his health, and to support the health of fellow World War I internees. As a hospital orderly, he incorporated the resistance of springs into rehabilitation programs for patients. He then translated the use of springs into machines and created the pilates equipment now used in the exercise system. In the late 1920's he established the first pilates studio in New York City.

For me, the important principles of this exercise program include:

- Use of mental focus to improve body awareness, movement efficiency and muscle control
- Awareness of neutral spine alignment, or proper posture, throughout the exercises
- Development of the deep muscles of the back and abdomen to support this posture
- Use of breath to augment mental focus and centering
- Creating length, strength, and flexibility in all muscles

Initially, the pilates exercise system was primarily used by the dance community who appreciated improved strength, balance and flexibility. Pilates discovered by the general public in the 1980's and it has since become a very popular exercise program.

The exercise system is usually taught in one of two formats: private or semi-private sessions using the unique pilates equipment, or group mat classes not using equipment.

The pilates equipment uses the resistance of springs to create effort. There are 3 main pieces of equipment, the reformer, cadillac, and wunda chair, and several others that can be found in pilates studios. The **reformer** consists of a sliding platform anchored at one end of its frame with springs. This platform is moved by either pulling on ropes or pushing off a stationary bar. Thus, exercises include both the challenge of moving the platform against resistance, and maintaining balance on the moving surface. The **cadillac** consists of a padded platform with a cage-like frame above it. From this frame various bars or straps are attached by springs which are used for the exercises. The **wunda chair** consists of a small bench-like platform with a bar attached with springs. Exercises are done by pushing on the bar while either sitting or standing on the bench, or standing or lying on the floor.

Mat exercises primarily focus on strengthening the muscles of the trunk and hip joint and increasing the flexibility. While the scope of the mat program is limited compared to the machines, there are many mat exercises that illustrate the pilates principles. Lately,

pilates has merged with other movement techniques, such as yoga, or use of an exercise ball. This promotes creative integration of the pilates principles into a greater range of exercises in the mat class setting.

Interested in pilates?

Before starting any new exercise system, check with your healthcare provider. Before starting a pilates program, check that your potential instructor has received training in the exercise system, and understands any problems you may have.

Many individuals will benefit from several one-on-one pilates sessions with a qualified instructor. While more expensive than a group class or mat class, the time, money and effort devoted to learning the exercises correctly is well worth the investment. Sometimes exercises performed incorrectly can be worse for your health than no exercise at all, or at least, a waste of time. Weekly pilates sessions may be enough, if you commit to practicing between sessions. Twice a week initially will help you learn the program more quickly.

The pilates principles of movement are taught in some of the simplest exercises of the system. Don't underestimate the benefit of simple exercises that support the deep postural muscles of the trunk, awareness of neutral alignment, and supple use of the shoulders and hips. Be sure that you are taught exercises that you can practice at home between your scheduled pilates sessions.

Given its roots in ballet and dance, some of the movements in the pilates system are very difficult and challenging. Some should be avoided in individuals with significant joint, back or movement problems. If you are pushed to fast for your comfort, speak up! The exercises in this system should be challenging (both mentally and physically) but not so difficult that you are struggling. If an exercise causes pain – stop and tell the instructor. You may be doing it incorrectly, or it may be too difficult. Finally, avoid mental and physical fatigue – this is when proper form is lost risking injury.