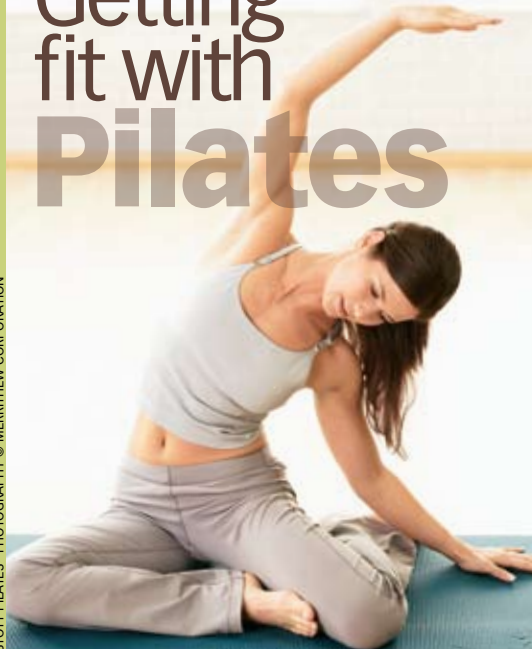


Getting fit with Pilates

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By Karen Asp

ALTHOUGH PILATES has been around for decades, this mind-body exercise is still one of the hottest fitness activities—and for good reason. Pilates offers mental benefits such as reducing stress and improving mental focus, but the physical benefits are the biggest draw.

Pilates was created in the early 1900s by Joseph Pilates, a gymnast and body-builder who devised a series of exercises that focused on the core postural muscles, often called the powerhouse, which include all of the muscles that wrap around your torso and hips—abdominals, gluteals and lower back. Breathing and spinal alignment are also crucial.

While Pilates isn't a cardiovascular activity per se, the exercises do involve flow, so while you're strengthening your body you may feel a slight increase in heart rate. For example, one fundamental exercise is called the Hundred. You start lying face up on the floor. You then lift your feet, shoulders and head off the floor and, with your arms at your sides, pump your arms up and down 100 times.

So why should you choose Pilates? "In every exercise, you're engaging all of the muscles in your body so you're get-

The Costco Connection

Costco.ca carries several items from Stott Pilates, including a reformer, stability chair and arc barrel and props package. Pilates DVDs are available in most warehouses.

ting a total-body workout, strengthening your muscles equally and proportionally," says Andrea Rogers, Pilates instructor and creator of the DVD, *10 Minute Solution: Quick Sculpt Pilates*.

Another well-known benefit of Pilates is improved posture. "Not only do you build strength to hold yourself taller, you're also more aware of how you move throughout the day," says Suzanne Bowen, a Costco member and owner of Seren Motus Fitness Studios in Tennessee, and star of the *10 Minute Solution: Pilates Perfect Body DVD*.

And because Pilates is a mind-body exercise, melding breathing with the movements, you're able to clear your mind. "You have to focus on what you're doing, and because of that you don't have time to

think about your worries, so you naturally relieve stress," says Rogers.

While Pilates is designed for everybody, no matter your age or fitness level, it's best to start with a beginning Pilates workout, usually done on a mat. You can learn Pilates from DVDs, but Rogers recommends taking a class or private instruction at first, if possible. "Working with an instructor for even just three classes can help ensure you're using proper form so you don't injure yourself," she says.

As you get more advanced, you can add Pilates tools such as the magic circle, arc barrel, resistance ball and resistance band to your mat workouts. "These props add resistance and increase the focus on the muscles you're working," Rogers says.

The mainstay of Pilates equipment, however, is the reformer. This piece of equipment features pulleys and springs that activate muscles differently than is possible on a mat. The reformer also requires a little more balance and coordination, Rogers says, adding that beginners through advanced Pilates practitioners can use it, although most beginners start with mat work.

Doing Pilates several times a week can benefit your mind and body. An added bonus? You'll tighten those abs and perhaps lose a little weight, which is why Pilates remains so popular today. **C**

Freelance journalist Karen Asp specializes in fitness, health and nutrition.



GETTY IMAGES

By Jane Doucet

TRADITIONALLY, February has been associated with handing out heart-shaped cards and candies on Valentine's Day. Now Canadians can celebrate their own hearts—and strive to improve how well they function—all month long: The Heart and Stroke Foundation (www.hearhandstroke.ca) has proclaimed February "Heart Health Month."

It's important to have a strong, efficient heart for many reasons, including lowering the risk of developing angina or having a heart attack or stroke. Several factors contribute to heart health, including not smoking, being physically active on a regular basis, eating a proper diet that includes five to 10 servings of fruit and vegetables each day, maintaining normal blood pressure, managing stress and getting enough sleep.

Here's what several experts say you can do to find what shape your heart's in and how to make it work even better:

1. Take an inventory of your risk and lifestyle factors. To do a heart and stroke risk assessment, visit www.hearhandstroke.ca/risk. "You should also get your blood pressure checked by your family doctor or at a pharmacy," says Andreas Wielgosz, an Ottawa-based cardiologist and spokesperson for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease; reducing salt intake can help lower it significantly.

2. Get a blood test to check cholesterol levels. Packaged foods containing trans fats contribute to increased levels of low-density lipoprotein, or LDL, (bad) cholesterol and lower levels of high-density lipoprotein, or HDL, (good) cholesterol. "You should only buy products that say 'zero trans fats' on the labels," says Wielgosz. The more artery-clogging trans fats you eat, the higher your risk of developing heart disease.

3. Quit smoking (or, better yet, don't start). Smoking is a major contributing factor for heart disease. Even if you've been puffing for decades, it's never too late to reverse the damage. "Within a year of quitting smoking, you'll reduce your risk of hav-

Paul Plakas: Pushing the limits

By Angela Pirisi

PUSHING PEOPLE'S buttons while getting them to push their limits, Paul Plakas sometimes comes across as being loud, insensitive, a bully. But while many question his methods, no one argues with the results. He's a nationally recognized personal

trainer who often appears on *Good Morning Canada* and on *Noon News* (CFRN TV Edmonton), and is the host of the Gemini Award-winning reality series *X-Weighted* on Slice TV.

This season, the show will feature families again and target childhood obesity. Plakas, a Costco member, is helping 13 families struggling with weight issues to shed 850 pounds. Thirteen families from Calgary, Vancouver and Kelowna will take it off in front of millions of viewers, while digesting Plakas' straight-up advice.

Saying bye to flab

Plakas has a personal connection with extra pounds.

He was overweight as a kid in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. He lived a *Supersize Me* life, dining on cheeseburgers, fries and shakes daily. His parents owned a restaurant, so going home for lunch basically meant eating out every day.

Then he reached a breaking point: He was 15 and tank tops were in, so he wore one to school. He got teased so badly for his flimsy arms and belly that he hasn't sported a tank top again to this day. He went

home humiliated and begged his parents to buy him a weight set, which they did.

His anti-bullying plan was to get fit, and it worked. He spent the summer working out and overhauling his greasy diet, then in September returned to school, where he received compliments instead of jabs.

Falling for fitness

Getting in shape was one thing, but Plakas never thought of making a career of it. "I had spent my first year in a general arts program at the University of Alberta, and I was flipping through the course calendar because I needed to figure out a career. That's when I found a program called 'Physical Education & Recreation,' and thought, 'Gee, I didn't know I could get a degree in that,'" he says. So he got his degree and landed his first job at the Centre Club, the who's-who fitness club of Edmonton. He did fitness testing for new gym members, designed programs for them, and oversaw the weight room.

The opportunity to do the TV show materialized after one of his clients, Margaret Mardirossian, owner of Anaid Productions and now executive producer of *X-Weighted*, approached him. Familiar with Plakas' in-your-face methods, she hatched the idea of a documentary-style show that would follow someone's journey to weight loss for six months. Now the show is in its successful fourth season.

Telling it like it is

Plakas says his methods aren't vastly different from

those of other personal trainers, but his style seems unique.

"I don't censor myself," he says. "My producer tells me, 'Paul, you don't think before you talk.' If I believe someone is being lazy or dumb, I'll tell them." Instead of a hand-holding approach, Plakas offers what feels more like an arm-wrestling match.

Beyond the harsh words, though, Plakas can sympathize with his clients: "Yeah, I know what it's like. I understand what they're going through. But it's annoying when someone doesn't give 100 per cent, and then they're surprised when the results are only 50 per cent." He strongly believes that effort equals results.

Shame on parents

As for this season's focus on kids, Plakas doesn't hold back his views on the issue of childhood obesity.

Who's to blame? "Parents, of course—they control the home environment," he answers. "I know parents are busy, but they have to prioritize their children's health."

He advises parents to encourage physical activity, such as signing up kids for sports camps, taking family walks, assigning physical chores to kids, playing with them—whatever keeps them moving. Most important, he suggests being a healthy role model: "If you make exercise part of your life, the greater the chance your child will too." **C**

Angela Pirisi is a Hamilton, Ontario-based writer who covers health, fitness and nutrition.

ing a heart attack by half," says Wielgosz. "After 10 to 15 years, the risk is the same as for someone who has never smoked."

4. Battle your belly bulge. Research has indicated that men and women with fat around their middle have a higher risk of developing heart disease than those with fat on their butts and thighs. That's because belly fat squeezes and strains internal organs such as the stomach, liver and heart.

5. Move more. "Physical activity is essential to heart health," says Fran Dunn, the physical activity coordinator with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia.

"Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of death in Nova Scotia. If we could encourage 10 per cent more Nova Scotians to be active regularly, the province would save \$25 million in health-care costs each year."

You don't need much time or money to move more; Dunn advises kicking a soccer

The Costco Connection

Costco warehouses carry a variety of heart-healthy foods and fibre supplements.

Members can have their blood pressure checked at their local Costco Pharmacy.

ball around the yard with your kids, jumping rope or walking your dog (if you don't have one, borrow a neighbour's).

6. Eat a heart-healthy diet. Such a diet is full of colourful fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and beans, low-fat dairy products, foods rich in omega-3s (salmon and tuna or fortified eggs and cereals) and plant sterols (produce, nuts, seeds and legumes). Avoid foods high in fat, salt and sugar or containing unhealthy trans fats. **H**

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