

PILATES: EXERCISE FOR A LIFETIME

More and more active aging exercisers are turning to Pilates to help increase circulation, strengthen posture and improve ability and agility. Find out why Pilates is beneficial at any age.

By Moira Merrithew

The American Council on Exercise reports there has been an increase in specialized fitness programming for older adults over the past few years. A well-balanced fitness program offers many benefits for seniors because it conditions muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones to help fight osteoarthritis and osteoporosis; keeps the body more limber; stabilizes joints; and lowers the risk of everyday injury. Physical activity helps enhance overall quality of life, increase life expectancy, and helps older adults stay independent.



As lifelong exercisers age, they find they can't hit a tennis ball or golf ball as hard, run as fast, lift as heavy, or perform as well, whatever their sport. Pilates is a mind-body system that emphasizes controlled movements and conscious breathing patterns – which enables participants to increase their form and function. This gentle activity provides many benefits that not only attend to some physical concerns of aging, but also help clients achieve greater well-being and self-esteem through their golden years. As a low-impact exercise with strengthening and flexibility benefits, Pilates is an ideal exercise program for seniors. It includes exercises that target every muscle in the human body.

Aging adults may experience numerous concerns with their bodies. Pilates can help address many of these issues. For instance, this type of exercise can combat loss of muscular strength and endurance without putting undo stress on the joints. Touted for their core benefits, most Pilates movements focus on strengthening the deep stabilizing muscles of the torso, helping to prevent back strain and maintain good posture. In addition, the joints often become less stable with age. Pilates

helps maintain stability by strengthening the deep support muscles of the joints, allowing people to do more dynamic activities such as walking, stair climbing or tennis.

Individuals who walk with assistance as well as those confined to wheelchairs can obtain dramatic benefits from a specialized exercise regimen with a series of programs specifically designed for those who may not be able to lay down on a mat or on other Pilates equipment, called Armchair Pilates. Working together, we can bridge the gap between the rehab, active aging and fitness communities to reach an immense number of individuals who otherwise would not realize their movement potential.

Regardless of the reason for someone's mobility challenges, there are hundreds of exercises that can be advantageous from a seated position. In many cases, participants will notice changes right away in their strength and mobility. With Armchair Pilates, movements are performed with or without the assistance of resistance bands or small weights.

Small props can help participants and instructors simulate many of the exercises normally done on traditional Pilates equipment with springs. The idea is to encourage ideal posture that works the all-important core muscles, and then work towards strengthening and lengthening the rest of the body as necessary.

This approach to exercise is based on the Five Basic Principles:

- breathing
- pelvic placement
- rib cage placement
- scapular movement and stabilization
- head and cervical placement

These techniques are essential for helping participants realize their goals. They encourage greater body awareness and work together to create a safe, effective foundation for Pilates exercise. As a result, clients perform individual movements more efficiently and achieve the maximum benefits from each exercise. Finally, the principles provide the backbone for

functionality in everyday life.

PRINCIPLE 1: BREATHING

Many people are unaware of their breathing patterns and tend to breathe in a shallow manner. Breathing more deeply, particularly during Pilates, fully oxygenates the blood, helps prevent unnecessary tension, activates the deep stabilizing muscles of the torso, and helps focus the mind on what the body is doing. Breathing into the lower lobes of the lungs increases power as the exercise below demonstrates.

PRINCIPLE 2: PELVIC PLACEMENT

Back pain and strain and postural problems become more common with age. Pilates can help minimize back pain and achieve optimal posture, while maintaining the natural curves of the spine. The position of the pelvis dictates the position of the lower back. Being able to support the pelvis in a neutral position keeps strain off the lower back. Furthermore, it takes abdominal strength to move away from neutral as the spine bends, and to return to this position.

PRINCIPLE 3: RIB CAGE PLACEMENT

Losing strength in the upper middle back (thoracic spine) can worsen lower back or neck tension, as the rib cage position directly affects the spine. Quite often the rib cage will lift up as an individual tries to sit tall or raise an arm. This flattens out the thoracic spine. Alternatively, the rib cage may drop down and give the appearance of an excessive curve in the upper middle back. When sitting or standing, it is best to have the rib cage directly above the pelvis.



PRINCIPLE 4: SCAPULAR MOVEMENT & STABILIZATION

As the shoulder blades move with the arms, stability is important. Weakened muscles in the shoulder blade area can easily lead to neck and shoulder tension. Also, if the shoulder blades become rigid and lack mobility, pressure can build up into the shoulder joints, leading to pain and inflammation.

PRINCIPLE 5: HEAD & CERVICAL PLACEMENT

Ideally, the neck (cervical spine) should hold its natural curve, with the head balanced directly above the shoulders when sitting in a neutral position. Excessive bending and rotation of the neck in any direction can put stress on the joints and lead to neck problems.

EXERCISE FOR A LIFETIME

Performing gentle exercises correctly on a regular basis (three times per week is recommended) can help improve the circulatory system through movement, improve postural strength, increase musculoskeletal strength and joint range of motion, and maintain functional ability. Pilates also connects the mind and body. Combined, these benefits make Pilates an ideal form of exercise for older adults. **OSF**

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