

Benefits and Limitations of The Pilates Method

By Amy Newhart

Pilates, (developed by the late Joseph Pilates) is a series of non-impact exercises designed to stretch, strengthen, and balance the body. It is a complete approach to developing body alignment, awareness and improved posture. This technique involves more than five hundred controlled movements performed either on a padded floor mat or with special equipment. The apparatuses are equipped with springs, pulleys, positioning bars, and handholds that allow the exerciser to stretch into many different directions and positions. According to the Feb 28, 2000 issue of Newsweek Magazine, "ten years ago five thousand people did the exercise routine called Pilates. The number now is 5 million in America alone."

Benefits of Pilates

It seems the greatest benefit of Pilates is the potential to increase flexibility. According to the American Council on Exercise, "flexibility is primarily due to one's genetics, age, gender, and level of physical activity. As we grow older our flexibility decreases, usually due to lack of activity." They also claim, "...flexibility will improve as we make it a regular part of our training regime." Throughout the Pilates session, this is an integral part of the exercise routine.

According to the website www.pilates-studio.com, Pilates offers the following benefits:

- General fitness and body awareness
- Injury prevention
- Improvement of technique for athletes and dancers
- Remedial and rehabilitation work
- Increase lung capacity and circulation
- Increase and create a balance between strength and flexibility
- Create an awareness of and strengthen dynamic stability
- Release stress
- Improve posture
- Realign your body
- Increase circulation

Harvard Women's Health Watch (January 1999 issue) provides a direct correlation between the claims made by the Pilates-Studio and improved health. "Correct posture and a lowered risk of injury are two benefits of a flexibility training regime." Maximize Your Training, by Matt Brzycki states, "Posture affects energy levels, efficiency, and freedom of movement as well as sports performance. It is easy to see how an athlete might be prone to injury without adequate or even exceptional flexibility." Thus, Pilates may be very useful for one who lacks flexibility.

Limitations of Pilates

One of the biggest limitations of Pilates is the fact there is not much scientific research available to support all the benefits Pilates books and websites claim. The University Of Miami School Of Medicine was quoted as saying, "there is still a lack of supportive literature examining the phenomena associated with Pilates-based techniques within the field of rehabilitation."

Can Pilates make you stronger? It is difficult to know if you are getting stronger because there is no quantifiable resistance. If you can balance for a longer period with a greater resistance on the reformer, does that mean you are getting stronger? Much of the improvement you realize from Pilates may be attributed to skill acquisition, rather than strength gain. Eventually, however, you will reach a ceiling when it comes to skill improvement. Once you have mastered a particular movement, the only way to the only way to further increase your strength is to gain body weight, since your body provides the resistance for each exercise.

How can this method help an elderly person? As we age, strength and balance often deteriorate, which may mean that some Pilates movements are less safe than is desirable. Furthermore, since many Pilates exercises involve the entire body, it may be difficult for one who is injured or who suffers lingering effects from previous injuries to ‘work around’ the injury.

According to www.pilates-studio.com, “The Pilates Method is an exercise system focused on improving flexibility and strength for the total body without building bulk.” Muscle is dense, lean and hard. A “bulky” look occurs when an individual gains muscle *without reducing body fat*. Bulk is a function of excessive calorie intake over a sustained period – not of any particular form of exercise.

My experience *I* took away from Pilates was this...yes, I could increase my flexibility and increase my sense of balance. Regardless of your choice, whether it is yoga, strength training, training, biking, or Pilates, be informed and realistic about what exactly you can expect to gain from it. There is no one exercise modality alone that provides a well-rounded lifestyle of health and wellness. In my opinion, Pilates is a potentially beneficial element in one’s over-all fitness program.