

Pilates, for the Best Shape of Your Life!

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If you want to work your body to the core, try Pilates (pronounced pih-lah-tees). This is a total conditioning program that works your body “from the inside out” by focusing on “core” muscles – primarily those in the stomach and back. It is also a mind-body exercise, which stresses proper breathing while performing a series of very precise, controlled body movements.

German-born Joseph H. Pilates developed the Pilates method of body conditioning during the First World War by devising a series of exercises to help people overcome injuries and postural problems. He regarded the abdominal area, in conjunction with the deep spinal muscles, as the center or “powerhouse” of the body. He viewed this area as a mental and spiritual center, as well as a physical, gravitational one. Pilates moved to New York in 1926 and set up his first exercise studio on Eighth Avenue in New York City. By the 1940’s he had achieved a certain amount of notoriety among the city’s dance community. By the 1960’s Pilates could count many of New York’s finest dancers among his clients. “Pilates,” as his method became known, was catching on and becoming very popular in dance classes across the United States. Since then, a Pilates “family tree” has developed over the years, with his students opening their own studios and teaching others. As a result, there are now several variations of the original Pilates principles. These range from those that Joseph Pilates pioneered to contemporary adaptations that incorporate modern understanding of fitness, anatomy and biomechanics. Essentially, the Pilates principles are as follows:

Concentration – the important mind-body connection. Conscious control of movement enhances body awareness.

Control/Precision – proper form for safe, effective results. It’s not about intensity or multiple repetitions.

Centering – focus on the torso (abs, pelvic girdle, lower back, glutes) develops a strong core and enables the rest of the body to function efficiently. All action initiates from the trunk and flows outwards to the extremities.

Stabilizing – makes a safe starting point for mobility. Before you move, you have to be still.

Breathing – Deep, coordinated, conscious diaphragmatic patterns of inhales and exhales initiate movement, help activate deep muscles, and keep you focused.

Alignment – Proper alignment is key to good posture. You’ll be aware of the position of your head and neck on the spine and pelvis, right down through the legs and toes.

Fluidity – smooth, continuous motion rather than jarring repetitions. Pilates has a grace and elegance to it.

Integration – Several different muscle groups are engaged simultaneously to control and support movement. All principles come together to create a holistic mind-body workout.

Pilates is beneficial for people of all ages, aptitudes and fitness levels. It conditions the body from head to toe with a no- to low-impact approach. However, those with a pre-existing medical condition or those with pre-existing muscle, bone, or joint injuries or disorders should seek medical advice before starting a new program. Pilates requires patience and practice, but results will follow. Regular practice of Pilates can:

- improve strength, flexibility and balance.
- tone and build long, lean muscles without bulk.
- challenge deep abdominal muscles to support the core.
- enhance body awareness.
- restore postural alignment.
- increase joint range of motion and freedom of movement.
- create a stronger, more flexible spine.
- reduce stress and physical/mental tension.
- offer relief from back pain, joint stress, and sports injuries.

So, who are some of the celebrities and sports icons who are devoted to Pilates exercise? For what it's worth, here are a few: Jennifer Aniston, Jamie Lee Curtis, Minnie Driver, Danny Glover, Hugh Grant, Jessica Lange, Madonna, Carrie-Anne Moss, Martina Navratilova, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker, Stefanie Powers, Rod Stewart, Sharon Stone, Patrick Swayze, Charlize Theron, Tina Turner, Kristi Yamaguchi, the Cleveland Indians and the San Francisco 49ers.

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