

The Evolution and Benefits of the Pilates Method

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Abstract

J. Pilates developed his method in the 20s of the XX century, as a concept that defines an ideal way of life. He firmly believed that to be happy, one must have control over their own body, and the fundamental condition for an ideal lifestyle is the balance between physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. The paper presents the evolution and emphasizes the principles and beneficial effects of practicing this system of physical exercise. It can be concluded that Pilates is a holistic exercise method that tones, relaxes, and increases flexibility

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1. Introduction

In the early 1920s, Joseph Pilates laid the foundations of his method, creating a system of exercises designed to engage each muscle individually without placing additional strain on the body as a whole.

He referred to it as the “art of self-control,” which later became known as the Pilates method. Over time, Pilates evolved from a form of rehabilitative gymnastics into a system of maintenance and body sculpting exercises. The entire range of exercises is performed at a constant rhythm, with slow, controlled movements, always accompanied by proper breathing and posture.

Even nowadays, after 100 years after the initiation of the exercise system, Pilates is a training method that is increasingly applied and discussed today. Reviewing the recent years literature, a wide variety of applications has been found. Beneficial effects of Pilates-based exercises have been proven for low back pain (da Silva et al, 2020), on dynamic balance (Johnson et al, 2007), on idiopathic scoliosis (Colak, Akcay, Apti, 2023) and even on delivery outcomes of pregnant women (Baradwan et al, 2023).

Pilates is, in fact, a comprehensive system of physical exercises designed to achieve a leaner, more harmonious, and healthier body. It consists of a series of movements that engage not only the body but also the mind and breathing. The objective is to achieve muscular balance by toning underutilized muscles and relaxing tense areas, leading to improved control, strength, and flexibility of the human body.

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2. Evolution

Initially, J. Pilates conceived his system of exercises to be performed on a mat or the floor without any apparatus or devices with springs and pulleys, a system known as “Pilates Mat.” His rationale was that exercises performed in a horizontal position exert less strain on the spine and joints due to gravity than exercises executed in a vertical position. In support of this aspect, the effectiveness of Pilates exercises in treating back pain was demonstrated in a study conducted at Florida Atlantic University on 22 overweight individuals with spinal problems. Through a 12-week Pilates program, they significantly reduced their chronic back pain. Additionally, this system has the advantage of being adaptable to any environment and serves as a foundation for performing various types of exercises.

Within the Pilates program, special attention must be given to the waist and lower back area, referred to as the “control zone”. J. Pilates discovered the importance of this core strength, which he named the “Powerhouse” – the origin body zone of all movements extending to peripheral areas. The Powerhouse or control zone consists of a group of muscles, including the abdominals, hip muscles, lumbar muscles, gluteal muscles, and pelvic muscles. These muscles encircle the body in the lumbar, sacral, and pelvic regions, forming an “Anatomic belt” that serves as the body's support and resistance centre. Many Pilates exercises require balance and stability to be executed correctly, necessitating engagement of the body's core or control zone.

According to B. Siler (2011), Pilates mat exercises teach us that “the body is the only and best tool we need” 120 to achieve physical fitness, emphasizing the importance of applying this method in practice. As the founder of the method stated, “Good physical condition is not achieved through wishful thinking nor is it acquired instantly”

Therefore, Pilates exercises should play a significant role in daily life, serving as an optimal means of understanding one's bodily actions and reactions to movement.

J. Pilates developed his method as a concept that defines an ideal way of life. He firmly believed that to be happy, one must have control over their own body, and the fundamental condition for an ideal lifestyle is the balance between physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. He was convinced that the power of the mind could control the body.

B. Siler (2011) provides an example of this theory through the natural playfulness of children. The flexibility and vitality of children are traits that adults often believe are lost forever. However, with determination, perseverance, and patience, it is possible to regain them, and results will soon follow. As J. Pilates stated, “In ten sessions, you will feel the difference; in twenty sessions, you will see the difference; and in thirty sessions, your body will be completely transformed”, emphasizing the effectiveness of his method when exercises are practiced progressively and consistently, starting with basic movements.



As a professor in a university, I introduced a Pilates-based exercises in a training program for overweight and obese female students. The decision to include Pilates mat exercises was based on several factors. First, floor exercises significantly reduce the impact on the spine and joints, which is crucial given the excess body weight and gravitational stress. Secondly, the Pilates method is not a strenuous technique that causes pain or exhaustion; rather, it involves simultaneous, slow, and controlled movements of muscle contraction and stretching, providing a relaxing, enjoyable, and effective workout.

Lastly, Pilates exercises yield rapid results, contributing to body reshaping and even quick weight loss. C. Grănescu (2010), Romania's most renowned Pilates instructor, stated that this type of exercise "helps to tone the body. Muscles become stronger, denser, and the body becomes slenderer and firmer. Essentially, it is a slimming process in centimetres"

Additionally, the Pilates exercise program aims to restore the body's natural balance through specific, controlled movements that engage each muscle individually without placing unnecessary strain on the entire body.

3. Principles of Pilates Mat Exercises

To fully understand the positive effects on body and to fully benefit from mat exercises, it is essential to know, understand, and apply the fundamental principles of Pilates.

3.1 Concentration

When performing Pilates exercises, focusing on each movement is crucial. Concentration is "the key element that links body and mind" 125 because the mind directs the body's actions and movements.

The success of this method lies in the practitioner's awareness of their capabilities and personal limits, allowing for the adaptation of each exercise according to individual needs.

3.2 Control and Attention

Each movement in the Pilates method serves a specific purpose, and to produce positive effects while avoiding injury, continuous control and attention are essential. Pilates exercises do not involve mechanical repetition of movements but rather "serve as tools for understanding the body" 126 and refining movements through muscle control in each exercise.

3.3 The Core Area

In modern society, the most engaged muscles are considered to be those of the arms and legs, often neglecting the core area, which is the most fragile part of the body and the one that poses the greatest challenges.



All the energy required for Pilates exercises originates from the core and then distributes to the extremities, aiding in movement coordination.

Considering this, the primary stabilizing muscles of the lumbar area must first be strengthened: abdominal, lumbar (paravertebral), pelvic, gluteal, and inner thigh muscles. To protect this area, these muscles must be engaged so that the lumbar spine remains in a neutral position, meaning the back should be completely pressed against the mat. The use of supporting muscles around the waist and pelvis is a fundamental principle of the Pilates program.

3.4 Fluidity

Our bodies are designed to be in motion (except when we eat and rest), which is why many of us feel significant discomfort when we remain still for long periods. The uniqueness of this method also lies in the fluidity with which

Pilates exercises should be performed. There should be no jerky or isolated movements; instead, they should be smooth and flowing. Some movements may be performed faster, but not in a sudden or chaotic manner. Dynamic energy replaces rapid movements, emphasizing suppleness and elegance. A slower movement rhythm can add intensity and support, helping us become more aware of which muscle groups are working and how the rest of the body responds to movement.

3.5 Precision

Like any exercise program (fitness, stretching, etc.), Pilates requires adherence to essential rules to achieve success in execution. Therefore, it is more important to focus on a single precise and correct movement rather than performing multiple movements halfway. This means we must incorporate maximum precision into the execution of exercises, helping us realize that, sometimes, less can mean more.

3.6 Breathing

If the mind helps us control the body, it also makes us aware of our breathing. J. Pilates, affected by childhood illnesses (asthma and rickets), practiced yoga and drew inspiration from yogic breathing techniques.

Yog Ramacharaka (1992) stated that “breathing should be considered the most important bodily function, as all others depend on it”.

When we breathe correctly, we use the largest part of our lungs, better oxygenating our bodies, and through the bloodstream, improving the functions of each organ. Therefore, during Pilates exercises, special attention is given to breathing, using thoracic breathing. This allows the abdominal muscles to remain stretched, engaged, and drawn toward the spine. Additionally, throughout the exercises, breathing is coordinated with movement: inhaling prepares us for effort,



while exhaling executes the movement. Learning how to breathe correctly helps us control movements better both during exercise and in daily life, being fundamental for improving anyone's quality of life.

4. Conclusions

It can be concluded that Pilates is a holistic exercise method that tones, relaxes, and increases flexibility. Further are presented the most recognizable benefits are of Pilates:

- Improves spinal and joint flexibility
- Relieves back pain and strengthens spine muscle
- Boosts physical strength and endurance
- Helps with weight management and body reshaping
- Enhances posture
- Tones the entire body
- Promotes better blood circulation
- Increases bone density
- Improves breathing function
- Enhances concentration
- Synchronizes mind and body
- Relaxes while maintaining fitness
- Supports overall well-being and self-confidence.

Whether athletes or regular individuals, young or elderly, regardless of age, gender, or physical condition, everyone can benefit from Pilates exercises as a technique for posture correction, health problem prevention, therapy, or maintenance. By practicing Pilates regularly, the body becomes more toned, balanced, and better equipped to handle daily stress. The benefits are not just short-term but extend over the long term, improving posture, health, and quality of life, ultimately leading to a healthier lifestyle.

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