

# High on Pilates

So much of fitness is about strength and flexibility. Pilates is a great system for perfecting mind, body and spirit.

**P**ilates is a mind-body technique that was invented 70 years ago by Joseph H. Pilates. It's a system of freestanding exercises which focus upon improving flexibility and strength for the overall body, without building bulk. Some of the first people to use pilates were legendary dancers Martha Graham and George Balanchine.

Since it's about mind and body when you exercise it's imperative that you mentally focus upon the muscle groups that you are using. Following a regular pilates regime can often mean a much leaner shape, increased flexibility and suppleness which promotes easier body movement. The main principle of the pilates technique is to become aware and to be able to activate the core muscles that are situated between the bottom of your rib-cage and across the line of your hipbones. These muscles form a continuous band from front to back, supporting the lower back, protecting your internal organs and keeping you upright. A strong core means less stress on your lower back and therefore less chance of discomfort or pain during day-to-day activities.

## Back-to-back Basics

- The number of reps are kept low. They are performed slowly and center around strengthening weaker muscles and stretching tighter ones.
- Each movement must be smooth and flowing. Never in a sharp or jerky manner.
- Slow and controlled movement promotes warming of the muscles and thus causes them to lengthen and open up spaces between spinal vertebrae allowing the body to expand and create a leaner shape.
- Attention to every small detail is vital. If you are learning from a book, read the instructions carefully. If you have joined a class, try book a space at the front so you can hear the instructor clearly. Check you are holding your head correctly, your body is in perfect alignment, your feet are placed in the right position and that you are breathing appropriately.
- The Neutral Spine - this can be described as the natural curve in your back. In other words, when lying on your back, you do not want to push your back flat so that you lose your neutral curve. Neither do you want your back to arch so much that your lower back lifts off the floor. The best method of finding the neutral spine is to just lie there, breathe in and out naturally and allow your back to relax into the floor without pressing it down. Note that this position is slightly different for everyone.

## Four exercises to get you started - from basic to slightly more advanced.

### Pelvic Tilt

This is great starting exercise and is good for warming up the back. Lie on your back, knees bent and with feet flat on the floor. Arms alongside you, palms face-down. In a neutral spine position, breathe in and breathe out. As you breathe out, gently tilt your pelvis forward and roll your lower back off the floor – one



Image: Will Warell 2003

vertebrae at a time. Breathe in, keeping your neck long and very slowly begin your descent in the same fashion. Try keeping your buttocks and feet relaxed throughout the movement.

### Working the lower abdominal muscles

Lie in the same position as the pelvic tilt. Place your hands on your hipbones to help stabilize your pelvis. Begin with the right leg. Keeping your left leg completely still, gently breathe in and let your right knee open sideways. As you breathe out, feel the resistance, pull your stomach in and return the leg slowly to the starting position. Now the other leg. Perform ten slow controlled reps, alternating legs each time.

### Single leg stretch

Once again adopt the same starting position as the exercises above. Hands interlaced and lightly supporting your head, lift your head and shoulders gently off the mat. As you breathe out, slide your right leg down, an inch off the floor. Breathe in, putting your head down and bringing your right leg back up. Breathe out, and slide your left leg down an inch off the floor. Complete ten repetitions, alternating each time.

### Kneeling arm and leg stretch

You need to be on your hands and knees for this exercise. The spine is neutral and the stomach gently in. Breathe out, and slowly lift your right arm and left leg off the floor and away from you. Don't lift them too high or you will lose your neutral spine position. Also remember to maintain a neutral pelvis, so that you don't tilt from side to side. Keep your eyes focused on the same point of the floor, so that you don't shorten your neck. Lower back down and then try the other side: ten reps, alternating each time.

Summer is coming and pilates is definitely a great stepping stone towards looking good in that bikini or those boardshorts. Lisa Lamberti teaches one-to-one, as well as instructing group sessions at her Southfields studio. She can be reached on: Tel: 07984920232 Email: pilates@taylormadephysiques.com (many thanks to Leesa for the pics from www.in2yoga.co.uk). 



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