

*Pilates power:*  
**TIPS**  
to improve  
your performance  
from the pros

BY JENNIFER NEWTON REENTS

Take a look around you and chances are someone you know has tightened, toned and strengthened his or her body by practicing Pilates. And if you are a practitioner, chances are you're hooked.

*So just what is Pilates?* Created by Joseph Pilates, his namesake exercises are based on more than 20 years of self-study and apprenticeship in yoga, Zen and ancient Greek and Roman physical regimens. A former boxer, Joseph Pilates created this workout regimen in the early 1900s, according to the Pilates Method Alliance (PMA — a nonprofit organization dedicated to the traditional teachings of Joseph Pilates and which provides education for instructors).

Pilates, the PMA states, are exercises and movements designed to stretch, strengthen and balance the body. The method focuses on the concepts of awareness, balance, breath, centering, concentration, control, flowing movement and precision and the goal of traditional Pilates is to uniformly develop the body and mind.

Of course today there are various approaches to Pilates. Regardless of the form you practice, there are ways to improve your performance and your results, with some tips from the pros.

"Pilates is about deceleration, decompression and opposition. With every move you are pulling the body apart to find more length," says Jennifer Gianni, creator of Fusion Pilates. "Why wouldn't anyone not want to practice Pilates if they are being taught it correctly? It is an exercise for a healthy body inside and out. Who doesn't want that? >>

# \* TIPS \*

## *Be patient with your breath and your movement.*

"Don't rush it. Your breathing is number one," says Gianni, who has more than 17 years experience working in physical fitness. "Your inhale should fill up your back/side ribs. You should feel the curves of your spine lengthen as you inhale. Your exhale should be slow and steady, not forceful, as if your exhale is trying to run a marathon. Give the muscles time to marinate."

Gianni suggests breathing in and out through the nose because one is able to fill the lower lobes of the lungs more fully with this type of breathing.

## *Pay attention to your feet.*

"Your feet are your foundation," says Gianni. "They affect everything above. Always practice a parallel foot — first and fifth metatarsal are on the floor. You have a slight heel swayout. (The big toes are slightly wider than the heels) and both sides of the heel are firmly touching the floor."

## *Continue your cardio workouts*

Pilates is not a substitute for cardio, says Tracey Mallett, Master Pilates Instructor (Rael Isacowitz Body Arts and Science method), host of Fox Fit TV's *The Method Show* and creator of *3 in 1 Patented Pregnancy System*, a DVD that combines Pilates, yoga and strength training for pre- and post-natal moms.



"For the best results, balance your weekly Pilates workout routine with some kind of activity which elevates the heart rate for at least 20 minutes to burn calories/excess fat," she says. "This will really help you celebrate the results of all your hard work in Pilates."

Mallett, who teaches a slightly different approach to Pilates with regard to spine placement during exercise, says to get the most from Pilates, it should be practiced two to three times a week.

## *Quality, not quantity*

"Focus on quality of the movement — not how many reps you can do," says Mallett. "Each rep should count with precise, controlled movements working on the smaller muscle groups that often get neglected due to the larger muscles taking over."

Mallett says it's best to slow the exercise down and focus on activating all the muscle groups, not allowing momentum to take over.

## *Practice all day long*

Sounds a little silly, but what Rose Zahnn, creator of the *PilatesFit* DVD and owner of Healthy Habits PilatesFit Studio in Sacramento, California, means is you can use what you have learned in Pilates throughout the day by paying attention to good posture, abdominal muscle control and breathing during your daily activities.

## *Pass on pain*

If you feel excessive neck, hip and back pain or tension, it's time to explore a different Pilates method, suggests Trent McEntire, producer of three Pilates videos and creator of the McEntire Workout Method.

## *Look at you*

Joan Breibart, Pilates instructor and president of the PhysicalMind Institute, formerly the Institute for the Pilates Method, says it's best to always practice Pilates in front of a mirror to ensure you are doing moves properly. \*

## BENEFITS OF PILATES:

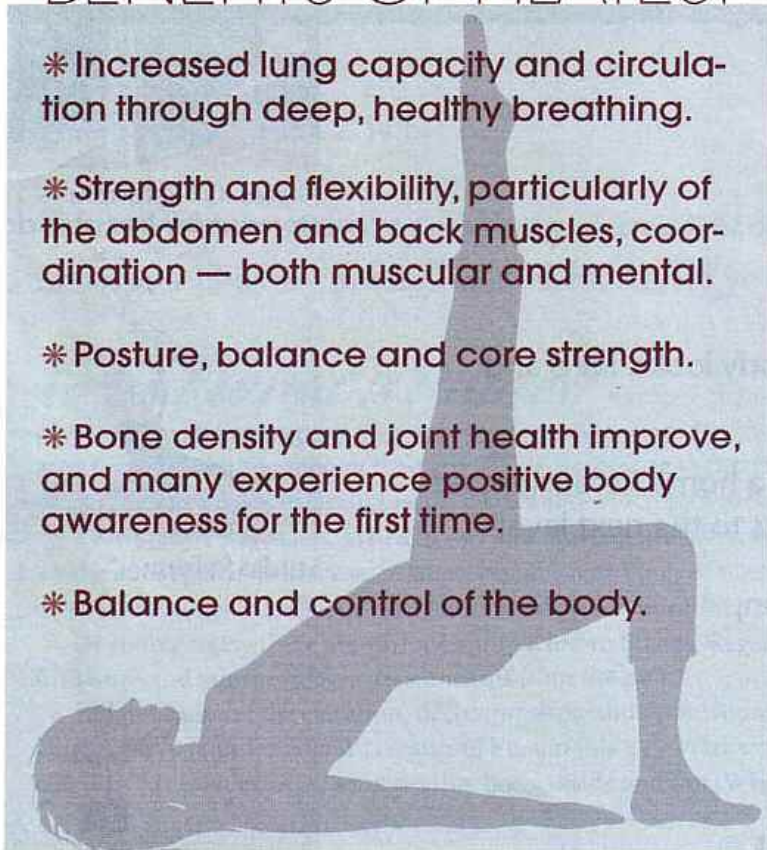
\* Increased lung capacity and circulation through deep, healthy breathing.

\* Strength and flexibility, particularly of the abdomen and back muscles, coordination — both muscular and mental.

\* Posture, balance and core strength.

\* Bone density and joint health improve, and many experience positive body awareness for the first time.

\* Balance and control of the body.



*About the author: Jennifer Newton Reents is a freelance journalist who writes about health and food. She resides in Texas.*