

Pilates: The Right Fit for Plus-Size

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Pilates is an ideal movement method for plus-size people embarking on a fitness program.

“If you want to get strong enough to lift a car, then lift weights. If you want to do it more efficiently, then do Pilates”—Michele Larsson, Core Dynamics Pilates

In other words, Pilates helps you to do whatever you want to do—whether it’s lifting a car, running a marathon, or just lifting your groceries—with greater efficiency and ease.

What is Pilates?

Pilates, originally called “Contrology,” is a unique system of exercise that involves full-body movements, with an emphasis on controlling the movements from the “center,” or “core” (the torso area), resulting in improved flexibility, balance, and core strength.

This method of exercise originally was conceived and developed in the early part of the 20th century by a German man by the name of Joseph Pilates. In an effort to cure himself of childhood ailments, Pilates began studying various athletic disciplines, including yoga, swimming, boxing, martial arts and circus arts. Not only did he cure himself, but then he went on to become a champion athlete. It was during World War I that he first began testing out his method on others; namely, injured soldiers living in the same internment camp as him. (Pilates was living in England when WWI began.) He developed a special exercise system: attaching pulleys and springs to the hospital cots and beds enabling the soldiers to engage in range-of-motion exercises. According to his story, his method was so effective that everyone in his internment camp was untouched by the 1918 influenza epidemic that swept across North America and Europe, which according to Dr. John Barry, a leading expert on epidemics at Brown University, was responsible for up to 100 million deaths.

Hearing about the effectiveness of his method, the Third Reich tried to lure Pilates into heading up the fitness program for their new inductees. Instead, Pilates decided to join his trainee, Max Schmelling (a world famous boxer) in immigrating to the United States. There, in collaboration with his wife, Clara (a nurse that he met on his way over to the States), he opened up a studio in New York City and began refining his method. It was during this time that many well-known dancers, such as George Balanchine and Martha Graham, discovered the effectiveness of his method and began coming to his studio to rehabilitate from injuries. Today, the method Pilates method has become extremely popular among athletes, performers and people interested in getting into better shape.

Why is Pilates a Good Fit for Plus-Size Participants?

Pilates offers a gentle, safe and non-intimidating way to embark on a fitness program. Since it was designed to accommodate many different levels of fitness and physical abilities; all of the exercises can be modified (or intensified). Furthermore, many of the exercises are floor-supported, which is important for larger people who have issues supporting their own body weight. Although Pilates does not provide for a cardiovascular workout, it does help to support cardiovascular activities. With its

emphasis on proper mechanics, it can help the participant to remain injury-free with increased physical activity. Finally, Pilates usually is done in a studio or physical therapy setting, which can serve as a more nurturing and less intimidating environment than a gym.

Similar to yoga, Pilates is a mind-body form of exercise and therefore helps to facilitate a sense of re-connecting with one's own body. Often times, larger people are disassociated from their bodies. Re-establishing that connection is a vital step toward a greater sense of well-being and a critical step in becoming more fit. Unlike some other forms of exercise, Pilates feels good (after a session, one comes away feeling both energized and relaxed) and therefore is more sustainable. It represents a shift away from the "no-pain no-gain" philosophy of exercise. Instead, it offers a first step to helping the participant simply get "back into their bodies" and just get them accustomed to moving again. With its emphasis on ease of motion, Pilates helps overweight people to reduce feelings of discomfort. In Pilates there is an emphasis on breath and increasing range of motion: participants learn how to coordinate breath with lengthened movements. This type of work helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system (our "relaxing and restorative" nervous system), as opposed to the sympathetic nervous system (our "fight or flight" nervous system), resulting in a feeling of calmness after each session.

Pilates helps to improve body mechanics. Participants learn how to both engage certain muscle groups and at the same time, relax, or disengage, other muscle groups. It is as much about learning how to "unuse" muscles as it is about using muscles. This kind of approach to exercise takes a tremendous amount of concentration. The movements are extremely subtle and therefore require close instruction. Unlike jumping on the treadmill with headsets and a newspaper, it is impossible to "tune out" when doing Pilates exercises. By engaging in this kind of precise movement patterns, however, Pilates practitioners become more efficient and start to move with greater ease. This is a great benefit for plus-size people, since ordinary tasks can become difficult.

An essential aspect to proper body mechanics is posture. In order to cue participants into alignment while going through the series of movement, Pilates language includes a battery of visual images. For example, a bowl of water is used as an analogy for the pelvis. When laying on the back, a participant is told to "keep the bowl of water level" in order to achieve "neutral spine," or proper alignment. The net result is improved proprioception, or awareness of where one is in space. This is particularly helpful for larger people, since, as mentioned earlier, they often experience a sense of disassociation with their bodies. In order to facilitate this proprioception, instructors use both verbal and tactile cues with their clients. Clients are also taught how to palpate themselves in order to help access different muscle groups.

Pilates is much more than just an exercise program, it is an educational process. For example, developing "good posture" requires a tremendous amount of learning new movement/holding patterns and unlearning old ones. Correct posture is critical for preventing and/or rehabilitating low-back pain. Also, a strong core is essential for supporting one's own body weight, whether engaging in exercise activities or just daily activities. The use of full-body exercises and learning how to support one's own weight, by accessing one's core, is particularly important for larger people in order to prevent chronic injury. "Corework," which has become a buzzword in the fitness field, is much easier said than done. To go beyond the superficial muscles in the torso area and begin accessing the deeper muscles (that provide the postural support)

requires a tremendous amount of heightened awareness, which can often be a long process to develop.

Pilates is much more than just an exercise program, it is a way of life. Because of its emphasis on functional fitness, over time, participants find that their work in Pilates carries over into every aspect of their lives. For example, one becomes more aware of how to “work from one’s center,” or utilize core strength, in order to drive the car, walk the dog, carry the groceries, or work on a computer. The end result: participants feel longer, stronger and more at ease.

Laura Putnam, MA, certified by the American College of Sports Medicine and Core Dynamics, runs her Pilates training business, “Smart Moves,” out of two locations in San Francisco: Strong Heart Strong Body and Potrero Physical Therapy. She offers one-on-one training, small group classes and wellness and health education seminars. She combines her extensive movement experience in competitive gymnastics, professional dance, Pilates, along with her experience in education in teaching people how to re-connect with their minds and bodies. She can be reached at 415-310-5505 or by email, at laura_putnam@sbcglobal.net.