

A HEALTHY CORE

Spurred by celebrity devotees from David Beckham to John Cleese, Pilates has taken on a trendy aura and its popularity is on the increase here in Hong Kong.

THE PRACTICE ORIGINATES from Joseph Pilates, born in Germany in 1880, who suffered from rickets, asthma and rheumatic fever. By the age of fourteen, Pilates had overcome his ailments and went on to become a gymnast, boxer, circus-performer and skier. He formulated the techniques whilst in a British internment camp during World War I.

Pilates went on to develop over 500 techniques, on four different pieces of equipment, by identifying biomechanical problems and developing a strengthening exercise for each, an exercise system based on improving flexibility, strength and body awareness without building bulk.

Core strength and spinal alignment are the basis for this – the core muscles comprising of the abdominal muscles, lower back and buttocks. As you develop core strength you stabilize your entire torso, allowing your body to move more freely and efficiently.

Maria Chan, Pilates Instructor at Fitness First says “unlike strength training which seeks to condition muscles by use of movement against outside resistance, Pilates strengthens muscles by use of resistance programmed from within the body.” As with other resistance training, Pilates can improve circulation and help you build core strength without bulk - so you don't end up looking like a body-builder.

Pilates is an ideal exercise programme for those in Hong Kong as it's less reliant on equipment or space and adaptable to small environments. Most of the major gyms in Hong Kong offer Pilates classes, with matwork, allegro, studio and rehabilitation Pilates programmes widely available.

Matwork Pilates is the most common type of programme and most fitness centres offer matwork classes to a group.

Allegro Pilates uses a machine called The Reformer – resembling





a single bed frame equipped with a carriage that slides back and forth on adjustable springs – that’s used to regulate different levels of resistance. Some fitness centres also offer one-on-one or small group Allegro Pilates classes.

Studio Pilates uses The Reformer and The Cadillac - often referred to as The Rack as it resembles something you might find in a medieval torture chamber - with several smaller pieces of equipment and is particularly suited to professional dancers and athletes.

Rehabilitation Pilates is offered to patients who have postural and joint-related problems by physiotherapy centres and even in some hospitals. Osteopaths, physiotherapists and general practitioners recommend Pilates as one of the safest forms of exercise today.

WHAT’S THE HYPE?

Proponents of Pilates claim the practice offers many benefits to a wide range of people and there are countless modifications to tailor Pilates exercise to anyone, regardless of age, gender or physical fitness.

- **BETTER FLEXIBILITY** Pilates has been shown to improve flexibility through the use of stretching and strengthening exercises and is designed to elongate, strengthen and restore the body to balance. Its holistic approach sets Pilates apart from many other forms of exercise.

“Aspects of Pilates are used in our training all the time...”

Nigel Stockill, head biomechanics and physiologist for the England Cricket Board

- **SIX-PACK ABS** Pilates has a toning effect and regular sessions should see a marked improvement in the tone of problem spots like inner thighs and upper arms. Pilates targets core muscles, minimising fat around your middle and with regular practice, flattens your stomach.
- **HELP WITH OTHER SPORTS** Traditional strength training isolates individual muscles one at a time, whereas Pilates works the muscles that produce the movement and the stabilizing muscles. Pilates can therefore be carried over to many sport activities to improve performance and reduce injury and has become especially popular with golfers, swimmers, dancers and tennis players.

And although Pilates has traditionally been more popular amongst women, the method is becoming more popular with men. A growing number of sportsmen, in male dominated sports such as football and rugby, are taking up Pilates as a way of improving co-ordination, mobility and flexibility, as well as for both recovering from injuries and preventing them in the first place.



“THE PILATES PRINCIPLES”

Centering: Pilates believed that exercise should begin from the very large group of muscles at the centre of the body – the abdomen, lower back and buttocks – known as the powerhouse. Even when working arm muscles, Pilates believed it's important to use that core strength. Your centre must always be completely engaged and stabilised to avoid injury.

Concentration: Concentration focuses mind-body awareness, establishes a better connection with your body and ensures each exercise is performed properly to achieve the maximum benefits of the exercise.

Control: Control is a fundamental principle of Pilates. When Joseph Pilates first developed the Pilates Method, he called it Contrology. When practicing Pilates, it's important that each movement of the body is made in a slow, controlled manner rather than swinging the body parts into position using the aid of momentum. By using controlled movements, various muscles are required to work together, helping the body to develop greater coordination and balance.

Precision: Practice makes perfect. There is a specific purpose for every Pilates exercise and it's important that each movement be carried out precisely. Each movement in Pilates has a specific start and end-point that must be observed as closely as possible to gain the maximum benefits from the exercise.

Breath: Breathing properly is considered to be one of the most important parts of the exercise, as controlling your breath, with deep exhalations as you perform each exercise, helps activate your muscles.

Flow: The energy of an exercise connects all body parts and flows through the body in an even way and each Pilates motion should be smooth and graceful so there are no static or fragmented movements.

The Welsh and New Zealand Rugby Unions are among the high-profile advocates of Pilates and many Premiership football teams are known to incorporate Pilates exercises into their training. Also popular with cricketers, Pilates provides benefits for batsmen and bowlers and both Mike Atherton, the former England captain, and Graham Thorpe have used Pilates as part of their rehabilitation.

- **RECOVERY** Evidence also shows that Pilates can be an effective treatment tool for various sports injuries and practitioners recognise the benefits of rehabilitation programmes that involve strength and flexibility training, as well as balance and efficient movement patterns.
- **GIVING BIRTH** Pilates is also beneficial for both pre and post-natal care and helps improve antenatal posture, alleviates associated back problems, improves labour breathing technique and aids relaxation. Post-natal benefits include helping return the body back to its pre-pregnancy shape and strengthening weak abdominals.
- **BODY AWARENESS** Other claims suggest Pilates heightens body awareness through higher levels of concentration involved in the exercises. Trained Pilates instructors will prompt and cue you to focus on your muscles as you perform the exercises.

Wherever you learn Pilates, you should make sure that your teacher is properly qualified, since Pilates taught by someone without the right training can do you more harm than good. Michelle Lam, Programme Manager for the Asian Academy for Sports and Fitness Professionals, warns “you should only learn from qualified instructors and listen to your body by not pushing too hard or fast. It's also important to enrol in a beginners class, which is usually smaller and allows the teacher to spend more time with you.”

It's never too late to take up Pilates. Joseph Pilates liked to reflect that your true age is as much a function of how you feel as it is of your date of birth. Pilates himself was also probably the best single advertisement for the benefits of the exercise technique that bears his name, since he was lively, active and still teaching until his death - from a fire at his studio - at the age of 87. As he himself put it “Physical fitness is the first requisite of happiness. In order to achieve happiness, it's imperative to gain mastery of your body. If at the age of 30 you're stiff and out of shape, you are old. If at 60 you're supple and strong then you are young.”