

Pilates focuses on strengthening your core

Considering starting a fitness program? Individuals today are faced with many choices and are often left wondering which is best for them.

One specific type of exercise program that has gained popularity over the past few years is the Pilates approach. Pilates was initially developed in the early 1900's by Joseph Pilates in Germany. He believed that the key to increasing strength and flexibility was to be in control of your body, specifically by learning the concepts of core activation, breathing and body awareness. These concepts work to promote a healthy alignment of the body, as many of us have developed poor postural habits either through other forms of exercise or through our occupations. Poor posture, poor body mechanics and decreased muscle endurance are some of the underlying causes of low back and neck pain. Pilates can assist in overcoming these imbalances and will help relieve the common aches and pains many of us endure every day. Age is not a factor with Pilates, everyone can benefit from its techniques. Classes are offered at a variety of levels.

So just what is this core that we have been talking about? The core is made up of four muscle groups that surround the trunk and the pelvis. It's easiest to think of the core as a box; the abdominal muscles make up the front of the box, the back muscles are of course the back of the box, the diaphragm (the muscle under the lungs that helps us breathe) are the roof of the box, and the pelvic floor and hip muscles complete the bottom.

So let's try a basic core contraction

- Lie on your back, knees bent and hip distance apart, arms by your side
- Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Focus on keeping a neutral spine (Your back should have a slight arch, so that you could slide a hand between your back and the bed.)
- Take a breath in and while exhaling, tighten the abdominals by pulling the belly button towards the spine. The muscles below the belly button should tighten. Be careful not to over-contract the muscles - you should be able to maintain the arch in your spine.
- When you are able to maintain this contraction without arching or flattening your back you have achieved the first step to a stable core.

There are many Pilates' videos on the market, and while we encourage home exercise, professionals caution that it may be wise to first be introduced to Pilates by a certified instructor. This will ensure that you are safely performing the movements. Once you and your instructor are comfortable that the techniques are done safely then certainly training at home is wonderful.

The Pilates experience is one that is enjoyable and can transcend generations. Strengthening your core will help to reduce pain, as well help improve your balance, stability and posture. For more information contact your local health professional.