



FITNESS FILE

PILATES

It's claimed you'll feel better in just 10 sessions. Why is the world shaping up with Pilates?

Words Victoria Meppem Photograph Stephen Ward

WHAT IS PILATES?

Developed in the 1920s by Joseph Pilates, the Pilates Method is a unique exercise system focused on integrating the mind and body in order to regain balance and control. As a child, Joseph Pilates suffered from *medical problems that left him weak and frail*, and he rehabilitated himself by combining Eastern and Western forms of conditioning, including gymnastics, boxing and yoga. During the First World War, while German-born Pilates was in a British internment camp, he became a nurse and practised some of his early rehabilitative ideas on patients. He rigged hospital beds with springs, allowing patients to exercise while lying down by moving the springs with their arms and legs. This idea eventually led to the development of a machine Pilates later called the Cadillac; apparatus still in use today. By the 1960s he'd won fame among modern dancers and his clients included George Balanchine and Martha Graham.

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT IT TO DO FOR YOUR BODY?

"It starts with correcting posture," says Sally Anderson, director of Pilates International in Sydney's Surry Hills, "particularly with strengthening core muscle groups – the abdominals and mid-torso. You support the spine and work towards a more direct or upright posture. You'll strengthen any muscle groups that are weakened, adding more holistic strength and enabling you to cope better with day-to-day life. It invigorates and energises the body by stimulating circulation and mental clarity."

HOW OFTEN DO YOU NEED TO PRACTICE?

"Ideally we say to people come two to three times a week; three would be my ideal," says Anderson. "Most people with really hectic schedules manage twice. You could do it every day – it's not a regime that breaks down muscle tissue particularly, or is heavy on

cellular renewal. Joseph Pilates used to say, 'Ten sessions and you'll feel better, 20 sessions and you'll look better, 30 sessions and you'll have a better body'. You'll start to feel the difference fairly quickly; you'll see your clothes become looser around the waist. Then progressively you'll really start to make changes to your body."

ARE THERE ANY AGE RESTRICTIONS?

There are no age restrictions once you've gone through puberty, says Anderson. "We're careful with young dancers or skaters who are working through into an elite area. They are capable of taking on the work earlier although you still need to be careful of their growth spurts and not load too much resistance. It's fantastic for older people because it's very low impact and that makes it quite safe for most as a lifetime exercise regime."

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOGA AND PILATES?

"Depending on the type of yoga you're doing, it is supposed to have spiritual applications, whereas Pilates is quite logical and sports-science based," says Anderson. "But in the work itself, Pilates uses a lot of yoga positioning. In yoga you hold poses and try and release the joints. In Pilates we move in and out of the poses, stabilising the joints and working through the full range of movement actively so as to work muscle fibres in and out of ranges."

WHO ARE YOUR CLIENTELE?

"We get a good cross-section of people interested in conditioning through to rehabilitation. Pilates tends to attract people with lower back pain, and it has a great reputation – deservedly – for dealing with lower-back pain and neck problems. Generally, we see people wanting a holistic form of conditioning for their bodies and a healthier lifestyle. People understand that for ongoing health they need to move in an ideal

way and add holistic exercise to their lifestyle and regime. Having to work in a very highly supervised environment makes Pilates labour-intensive, and the equipment needed plus the amount of training people go through to be good Pilates instructors makes it expensive compared to other fitness regimes. But it's a self-caring investment in the long run and it will prevent you spending money on osteopaths or physiotherapists in the future. You probably have to look at it in terms of a personal-training venture, and then the price is very competitive."

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

The cost of regular studio sessions can range from \$25 to \$45, with private sessions ranging from \$50 to \$100-plus. A session usually lasts an hour. Mat work classes generally range from \$15 to \$25 per class.

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WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN CHOOSING A STUDIO

- The ratio of clients to instructors. There should be a maximum of four clients to each instructor.
- Are the staff trained through a comprehensive training program? Comprehensive training includes theoretical lectures, a practical apprenticeship, and written and practical testing. Establish how many hours were spent in the training program.
- For how long have the instructors been teaching Pilates? Ask for background on the staff; a reputable studio will be happy to help.
- Is the studio fully equipped? Apparatus should include, at minimum, a Reformer, Cadillac, Wunda Chair, Spine Corrector, Hi Barrel and Ped-a-pul.