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Percentage more of your rectus abdominis (six-pack) activated by pilates move the "Teaser" (see 121) compared to crunches

SOURCE: AUBURN UNIVERSITY MONTGOMERY, US

I'm like a bird...



THE POWER OF

PILATES

WANT A STRONGER BODY, BETTER POSTURE, SLEEKER LIMBS AND A SUPER-TAUT STOMACH? WE THOUGHT SO. TAP INTO PILATES' POWER (WITHOUT PAYING A FORTUNE) WITH OUR AT-HOME WORKOUT.

WORDS: EMMA ANDERSON; JEN ATOR; SOL WALKLING; PHOTOGRAPHY: JORG BADURA/TRUNK ARCHIVE/SNAPPER MEDIA



From celebs to athletes, the list of pilates fans keeps growing. Here's why: "Pilates puts your muscles – especially the smaller, stabilising ones – under constant tension over a large range of motion to create that enviable long, lean look," says pilates studio owner Lauren Piskin. What's more, a recent study in the *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research* found that women who swapped their usual workouts for two 60-minute pilates sessions a week saw significant increases in abdominal endurance, hamstring flexibility and upper-body muscular endurance. Yep, sucking your belly button towards your spine has big pay-offs. We delve deeper into how it all works...

Where to do it

Gym

WHY It's cheap, and great for anyone who likes exercising in a group environment.

HOWEVER... You might not be working the right muscles, as you won't get as much individual attention from the instructor.

Studio

WHY Classes are smaller, so you get more attention (plus you can use equipment). "If you've got any problems in your body you're better off going to a studio and getting qualified attention," says pilates practitioner Sally Anderson. "Then they can set you home programs."

HOWEVER... Prices are higher.

One-on-one

WHY This is ideal for rehabilitation after an injury or if you have back or postural issues, as it can be specifically tailored for your needs.

HOWEVER... The prices can break the bank.

Reformer

WHY Works you harder as you have to stabilise more due to working on a moving platform. Gyms are increasingly offering reformer group classes, as well as pilates studios.

HOWEVER... As with mat classes, you'll get more specialist attention in a studio.

Let's start at the very beginning: nearly 100 years ago, Joseph Hubertus Pilates, a German-born bloke, was stuck in a British internment camp during World War I. Impressively, he decided this would be the ideal time to develop a new exercise philosophy he'd been working on, and started training his fellow detainees using bed springs, barrel rings and hospital beds. After the war, he moved to New York and opened up the first pilates studio, which quickly became popular with dancers. In the past decade or so pilates has hit the mainstream, with pilates studios and classes everywhere – although we're guessing none of them feature a hospital bed segment.

STRONG PRINCIPLES

So what's behind pilates' lasting appeal? At the core (quite literally) are Joseph Pilates' "principles", centering around body control, concentration, breathing and connecting – an overall understanding of how the body works and how to use it in the most effective way. It's performed on a mat on the floor or on a reformer – a bed-like contraption that uses, yep, springs.

The "pilates breath" is in through your nose and then out through pursed lips (classes will often encourage you to make a loud "breathy" noise on the exhale), expanding your rib cage to the side. The aim is to prevent your ribs from popping forwards, and to help engage your abdominal muscles correctly.

Another secret to pilates' success is that it works muscles that might be neglected in other workouts. This is why pilates classes sometimes feature the gratifying sight of a pumped-up body-building bloke struggling to do a basic move.

"Pilates targets your postural muscles (ie, your abdominals and back), which are predominantly comprised of type 1 (or slow twitch) muscle fibres," says exercise physiologist and WH fitness advisor Kate Pumpa, who's been teaching pilates for 10 years. "This means they can contract repetitively for a long period of time without fatiguing – they keep us upright all day without us even thinking about it."

By specifically targeting these muscles, pilates is incredibly effective at scoring you a firm and flat stomach. In a study by Auburn University Montgomery, US, it was found that a pilates move called the "Teaser"

activates a huge 266 per cent more of your external obliques (that's your love handles) than crunches. Pretty impressive stuff, seeing as the crunch is still most people's go-to ab flattener. Check out how to do the Teaser at womenshealthmag.com.au – and for more super-effective moves, use our workout cards, over the page.

ENGAGING BEHAVIOUR

There are two prerequisites for any pilates move: 1) engaging your inner abs, which support the muscles in your back, and 2) lifting and lengthening your upper body. "Think of your spine as a bendy straw," says pilates instructor Kristin McGee. "Everyday movements like walking, sitting and driving compact that straw. Pilates stretches it out again. "People say they grow an inch in class," McGee says. "It's really just that you find the space in your spine that you always had."

Pilates practitioner Sally Anderson of Pilates International in Sydney and Melbourne has seen this effect too. "Pulling your abs in – navel to spine – strengthens your midsection and is one of the first ways of improving your posture," she explains. "If you don't have power from the centre of the body everything becomes weak and atrophies. Keeping your spine healthy is one of the best anti-ageing things you can do for"

Core values

SO, WHEN THEY SAY "ENGAGE YOUR CORE"...

This is what they mean: the four layers of the abs (transverse abdominis, rectus abdominis, external and internal obliques), your hip flexors, spine extensors, hip adductors (inner thigh muscles), hip abductors (including the gluteus medius), and multifidus. Yep, all that's your core.



LIPTON GREEN TEA. START SOMETHING GOOD.



LIPTON TEA CAN DO THAT

yourself.” And hey, it doesn’t hurt your chances of rocking a bikini, either...

BONUS FEATURES

Pilates can have benefits in quite a few areas besides abdominal strength, says Pumpa. “In my opinion, if pilates is practised with correct principles and technique, it can help with pelvic floor strength, enhance your flexibility and range of motion at all major joints, enhance balance and may improve non-specific back pain.” In fact, one study published in the *Journal of Orthopaedic & Sports Physical Therapy* found that pilates was more effective than traditional care in decreasing chronic lower back pain and disability.

Pilates’ body-toning, muscle-engaging, injury-preventing potential isn’t lost on professional athletes. “There’s probably not many sportspeople leaving it out of their training programs now,” says Anderson, who says she counts a number of high-profile athletes in her classes.

“Pilates has a well-deserved reputation for being great for rehabilitation and postural care,” says Anderson. “We often get referred to by doctors and physios.” However, if you have back pain, signing up to your local gym’s pilates class isn’t necessarily the best move. “A group fitness environment is more about conditioning – you don’t want to see back problems in there.” If you have any injuries or special needs (or you’re pregnant) Anderson recommends a specialised pilates studio – or a one-on-one class, if you can afford it.

EVERYDAY HERO

An even better aspect of pilates? It’s not just during your workout that your body benefits from it – it even has the potential to improve the way you walk,

sit and move in everyday life. “The more you practise something, the more subconscious the process becomes,” says Pumpa. “I get my participants to associate contracting the TA [transverse abdominis] – ie, pulling your belly button towards your spine – with traffic lights. Every time you stop at a red light, you should pull your belly button towards your spine. Practised regularly, you’ll find you automatically activate your TA when you’re carrying out everyday activities such as lifting heavy objects. This may help prevent back injuries as abdominals take some of the load of the task away from the back.” Sounds good to us. **wh**

WH TESTS IT

TARA ALI, FEATURES ED, 37
 “I love pilates but sometimes get a little bored with the pace of it. Xtend Barre is pilates on crack – it’s an up-tempo mix of ballet moves, pilates moves and light weights. There’s no time to get bored. The class consists of a lot of tiny moves like pliés, biceps curls and crunches, with lots of reps. The class moves from standing, to barre work to a mat, really challenging all of your muscle groups. Our instructor worked us till our limbs were shaking. Honestly, this is the toughest class I’ve ever taken – and I consider myself to be pretty fit. It took two days for my stomach muscles to stop hurting every time I laughed. And it was three days before I could walk normally again.”

WH TESTS IT

CRYSTELLE COULON, SENIOR WRITER, 25
 “We began the class with classic pilates moves – on a trampoline. To say I struggled to keep stable would be an understatement. After 15 minutes comes the cardio part: jumping, twisting, kicking and running on the tramp (all while carrying mini weights and keeping our cores locked). By the end of the hour I was drenched in sweat. Our instructor told us that a study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* found rebounding burns 40-50 per cent more kJs than running. Can’t say I’m surprised. What’s more, it’s heaps of fun.”

What-a-lates?

WE SUSS OUT SOME OF THE NEWER PILATES-FUSION CLASSES

Xtend Barre pilates

Raved about by pilates and dance enthusiasts, this method integrates the ballet barre and a fast-paced 55-minute choreographed routine for a non-stop challenge. Coordination, balance and good body awareness are a must. Try it at Emergypilates.com.au in Sydney or see Xtendbarreaustralia.com.au for classes in other states.

Bootcamp pilates

This trend parades in many forms from fast-paced reformer workouts in gyms to 10-minute pilates DVDs incorporating weights. It breaks one essential pilates idea – not to exercise to the point of muscle fatigue. Instead followers add push-ups, lunges, squats and other drill-type exercises.

Cardiolates

Remember the fun you used to have on a trampoline as a kid? Well, practising this new pilates method means you work up a sweat on your own “personal rebounder”. Sounds gimmicky but it’s based on solid NASA research – bouncing up and down triggers your pelvic floor, automatically stabilising muscles. Head to Wellcentred.com.au in Sydney (Wellcentred.com.au) for choreographed group classes.

Rhythm pilates

Rhythm pilates integrates traditional mat exercises into sequences performed to music. Get in touch with your inner pilates dancer at Adelaide’s Club Rhythm (Clubrhythm.com.au) or head to pilatesanytime.com for an online taster of a similar style of pilates developed in the US (it’s heading over here soon).



FOR MORE PILATES WORKOUTS, HEAD TO womenshealthmag.com.au