

PILATES FOR WEIGHT LOSS

Strengthen, Lengthen and Tone

by Victoria Everman

Pilates, similar to yoga in its concentration on breathing, was developed by Joseph Pilates in just the past century. While it's rare to break much of a sweat during a session, with its focus on major muscle groups and slow, intentional movements, Pilates has become a popular practice for effecting weight loss.

“Pilates can help to build and maintain lean muscle mass while you are losing weight, realign posture as the body's center of gravity changes, promote long elegant posture and graceful flowing movement, and keep you centered and energized—all at the same time,” explains Jillian Hessel, a Los Angeles-based Pilates teacher with 26 years' experience.

“I find that many people are successfully losing weight with Pilates because they become much more aware of their bodies, and in turn, treat them better and make better food choices,” adds Ana Cabán, a Pilates fitness expert who has operated studios on both coasts.

After chatting with a panel of pros and diving into the fitness method's history, we arrived at the top five ways to become trim and toned by practicing Pilates.

Burn More Calories

Creating muscle mass is one of the best ways to increase calorie-burning potential. Pilates can help accomplish that in spades. “Simply stated, Pilates is strength training,” says Alycea Ungaro, owner of Real Pilates, in New York City. “We work with resistance to increase strength and hence, muscle mass. Us-

ing springs and different apparatus to increase the load to the muscles, we can affect a metabolic increase by building lean muscle mass.”

Individuals can add a variety of tools to a basic Pilates mat routine to help tone muscles all over and avoid boredom. “I enjoy adding bands, body rings and light weights to my routine because it provides variety and challenges muscles in a different way,” says Cabán.



Resistance bands are easily portable, yet create a considerable amount of challenging resistance to help firm and tone. The body ring, well known among Pilates enthusiasts, is another resistance tool used during mat exercise, often focusing on the lower body and core muscles.

Look Thinner

One of the best ways to look and feel thinner is to maintain good posture. Pilates helps create better posture by firming not only the abs, but the back, as well. "All Pilates work is performed with proper alignment and attention to posture. By establishing optimal spinal alignment, you can facilitate better circulation, improved lymphatic flow and increased stamina of the muscles along the spine," says Ungaro. Not only will toned spinal muscles help with continued weight loss vis-à-vis increased metabolism, standing up straight will automatically make a person appear thinner, thereby increasing one's confidence, as well. "You will stand taller, hold your waist tighter and feel stronger," she adds.

Craft Core Muscles

Pilates is all about core strength—front and side abdominals and the entire back. Toned abs and a strong back help to prevent injury, improve posture, reduce lower back pain and even promote proper bowel function. But the most popular result is flat abdominals.

Once a favorite of 1930s New York City dancers George Balanchine and Martha Graham, Pilates now has 10 million followers in the United States alone.

"Pilates teaches people how to use their abdominals correctly—how to contract the abdominal wall, rather than let it distend. This simple mechanism can be used 24/7 in your daily life. That is the single reason that Pilates flattens abs so quickly," comments Ungaro.

Improve Eating Habits

"The increased body awareness will also make you less likely to indulge in unhealthy eating habits," notes Ungaro. Experiencing the improvements to your body and of what it's capable is incredibly motivating. "You will have a new respect for your body and be more likely to take better care of it," she says.

Complete with Cardio

No weight loss regimen is complete without cardiovascular work. Combining the strength training of Pilates and a consistent cardio session works to help you lose weight and tone up nearly twice as fast as doing either routine on its own. Walking up hills works, or to add variety and challenge, "Consider swimming, running or the elliptical machine," suggests Ungaro. "Steady-state activity is great for cardio conditioning."

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