



pilates

It's got your back.

BY SUAN ROMANO

It could start out as a twinge. A simple glitch in your daily activities that begins as a slight irritation could then escalate into a full-blown, take-off-work-and-lie-on-the-sofa back ache. Maybe it's a little more drastic: a car accident, a fall, or chronic overuse. Whatever the experience, most of us will agree that back pain is quite simply a pain the... back.

Common back issues are the result of poor posture or injury. With the core muscular strength and the spinal flexibility that Pilates gives its devotees, chronic pain and muscle soreness disappear. Plus, reeducating the body's movement patterns will not only make everyday functioning that much easier, it will speed the recovery from any injury you do incur.

The Pilates Method was created by Joseph Pilates to condition the mind and body through systematic training using breath, movement and imaging. As our knowledge of kinesiology and exercise develops, so does Pilates, all the while remaining true to the fundamental program of physical and mental conditioning Mr. Pilates laid out.

So, what's the big secret of the method? Why are there hundreds of infomercials out there hawking the long, lean muscles of Daisy Fuentes? The success of Pilates lies in its aim - to balance the body's muscular and skeletal systems in order to work effectively together. Once the stabilization occurs and negative muscular holding patterns are released, the body can create functional movement that allows us to experience life with ease.

One of Pilates' jobs is to strengthen the stabilizers - the muscles around the spine and pelvis - creating a girdle of sorts for the spine. Combined with the building of the abdominal muscles, back muscles and hamstrings, the stabilizers can correct poor posture or muscle imbalance. This strong center is the basis from which all movement then occurs. A person sitting at a desk all day without using her core musculature will create joint and muscle tension. An athlete using his arms or legs without the support and added force of the abdomen will not only not play up to his full potential, but will mostly likely injure himself as well.

The 33 bones that make up the vertebra and protect the spinal cord, joints, ligaments and discs all benefit from the flexibility Pilates builds. Flexibility is another key "job" of Pilates. A spine with a full range of motion is a happy spine, with discs like solid shock absorbers and muscles that allow for flexion and extension.

"The type of patients that I recommended to Pilates were low-back pain sufferers and others who for some reason or another had poor posture. Pilates therapy reduces pain and weakness by increasing the strength and flexibility of the core," says physical therapist and Pilates instructor Kim Waguespak.

And there, underneath all the fancy therapy words like "functional movement" and "exercise therapy" lies the key - strengthen the muscles of the core and you'll lose the back pain. Strengthen the trunk of the tree and the branches will flourish. However you want to put it, core strength and stability are vastly important. The "core" of the body - the deepest of the abdominal muscles such as the transverses, the multifidus, pelvic floor muscles, obliques, buttock muscles and all the big

and little muscles that surround the spine – protects the back by creating a corset of sorts around it.

“Patients as well as regular persons looking to be fit really benefit from Pilates. It helps them tone up, stand taller and take control of their back issues,” reports Waguespak.

Pilates instructor Lorraine Bradshaw saw the difference in her own body after turning to Pilates to ease pain associated with fibromyalgia, a chronic disorder that causes widespread pain and stiffness in the muscles, tendons and ligaments.

“Pilates done correctly really enhances flexibility in the back, which, for me, assisted in relieving the aches and pains I had,” Bradshaw explains. “The simple act of working through the movements and articulating the spine is easy on my joints and increases my core strength at the same time.”

Not all Pilates students have back pain. Some, like Kim Sultan, just enjoy the body awareness and overall strength she gained

through her practice. “I see the difference in my movements every day – especially when I pick things up,” she says. “Plus, I lost that rounding of my shoulders that a lot of women have. My posture improved.”

Sultan says it is encouraging to be able to measure her progress. “I saw my back becoming stronger and I was able to do more advanced exercises while seeing changes in my body, too.”

Protecting our backs from the rigors of life can be done. By integrating Pilates with other programs, participants are given a greater ability to take part in everyday activities with ease. Of course, exercisers should always check with their physicians before starting any new exercise workout. They should also be sure to work with a certified Pilates instructor. Ask around – you never know if your physical therapist, chiropractor or physician has experience with or has been trained in Pilates or Pilates-evolved rehabilitation programs.

Physical therapist Kim Waguespak says Pilates can be beneficial to those suffering from these and other issues:

- **Back pain**
- **Joint restriction**
- **Repetitive movement or occupational overuse syndrome**
- **Sports injuries**
- **Postural abnormalities**
- **Sciatica**