

GENTLE MOVES FOR SORE JOINTS

Pilates and yoga can help to increase your flexibility and strength. **Andrew Harding** finds out how to make these gentle exercises a part of your life

In recent years, Pilates has become popular with everyone from the pop singer Madonna to Sunderland Football Club. First developed in the 1920s, it is now practised by people with many types of arthritis. Pilates (pronounced 'pi la tiz') helps to strengthen the core muscles deep within your chest, back, stomach and pelvis. 'My back is very bad but I always feel much better after a nice gentle workout where everything has been stretched,' says 50-year-old Yvonne Bennett, who has osteoarthritis.

Yoga can have similar benefits. It teaches slow, gentle ways to help you to move more easily and become more aware of how you are using your body. It has a more spiritual and philosophical base than Pilates, and incorporates a wide range of gentle physical and relaxation exercises.

WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga is an ancient Indian word meaning union between mind, body and spirit. There are many different forms, but in practice most classes include relaxation, exercises to stretch and flex your body, some held postures, and meditation. Yoga can be adapted for different forms of arthritis as well as many other conditions. The aim is not to adopt extreme postures but to become more flexible, focus on your breathing and relaxation, and be more aware of how you are using your body. 'Yoga can help in many ways, but there should be no increase in pain and you should never use inflamed joints,' says Robin Monro from the Yoga Biomedical Trust. 'Yoga improves your balance, mobility and mental well being. You do not need to be fit, and you can start at any age. It is ideal for older people who have more time to practise, and there are special exercises for people who use a wheelchair.'

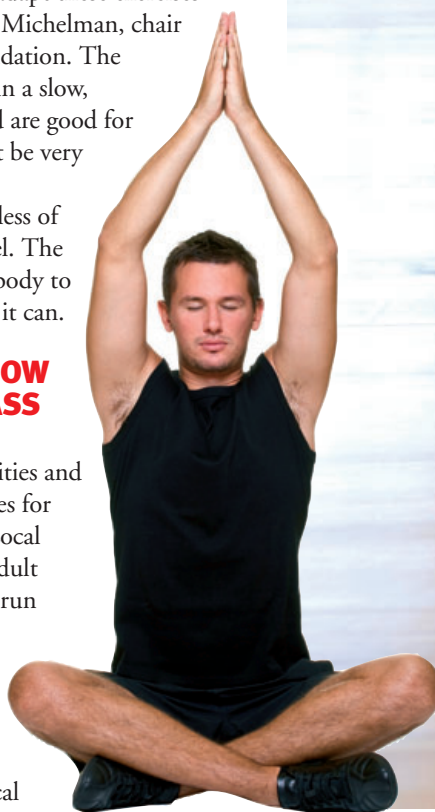
WHAT IS PILATES?

Pilates exercises are designed to strengthen the muscles deep within your body that can maintain good posture and core strength. There are a wide range of gentle exercises that keep your neck, spine, hips and pelvis properly supported and positioned. 'I tell people to think of their body as a crane,' says physiotherapist and Pilates teacher Jinny Wishaw. 'You wouldn't use the crane if it wasn't properly supported – likewise, your arms and legs need to have good support from your core.'

Pilates helps to improve flexibility, balance and co-ordination. A Pilates teacher will select different exercises for different people, depending on what they need and what their difficulties are. 'A good teacher will know how to adapt these exercises for you,' says Fran Michelman, chair of the Pilates Foundation. The exercises are done in a slow, controlled way and are good for people who cannot be very active or who are overweight, regardless of age and fitness level. The aim is to help the body to function as well as it can.

WHERE AND HOW TO FIND A CLASS OR TEACHER

Many local authorities and councils have classes for Pilates and yoga. Local leisure centres or adult education colleges run classes, sometimes for a few pounds a class. Find out if there are free classes for people over 50 in your local



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area – councils generally try to encourage people to keep active.

‘Everyone will have things they can’t do and you won’t feel like the odd one out,’ says Christine Miles, who has rheumatoid arthritis. Contact the teacher before going along to a class to check that it is for beginners, or you could even ask for a one-to-one session or to observe a class before joining.

The Pilates Foundation, the Yoga Biomedical Trust and the British Wheel of Yoga have contact details for teachers across the UK. Getting a personal recommendation from friends or people you meet in other groups or classes can be a good way to get started. Fitness trainers who teach Pilates do not always understand arthritis so be sure to ask about their training and experience.

There is no one standard form of training for yoga and Pilates instructors. The organisations listed at the end provide much but not all of the training in the UK. Talk to a prospective teacher and ask how long their training was for. The generally agreed minimum is 12 months. ‘There are three other things to check,’ says Gabby Groves, a personal trainer and Pilates teacher who is interested in back care and rehabilitation. ‘Are they on the Register of Exercise Professionals (which covers a wide range of areas), do they have public liability insurance, and do they have a current first aid certificate?’ You should also ask about their background, understanding of arthritis and if they have done the extra training for arthritis.

HOW TO GET STARTED

You do not need to be fit, or even used to exercising to start yoga or Pilates, but if you have back pain it is advisable to see your GP first. ‘I disliked exercise but several years ago knew I had to do something because my rheumatoid arthritis was very active,’ says Philippa Jones, 47.

However, there are some practical steps to take to protect yourself and to help a tutor give you the right support. Philippa

first went to see a physiotherapist who was able to see how she was using her body and give her

some specific exercises to help improve her posture. ‘Most physiotherapists use elements of Pilates, known as core stability exercises,’ says physiotherapist

Alison Douglas.

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'Pilates stabilises the deep muscles around the joints and while it isn't for everybody, I recommend Pilates for people who have arthritis in their spine because it can help to stabilise the lower back.'

It is important to let your Pilates or yoga teacher know in advance if you have any injuries, medical conditions or joint replacements that will affect the movements you can do. Classes provided by your local council or authority have an enrolment form where you can say which joints are affected and what you can and cannot do. The Pilates Foundation advise that if your doctor recommends Pilates, you get a letter from them to explain to a teacher any injuries or medical conditions.

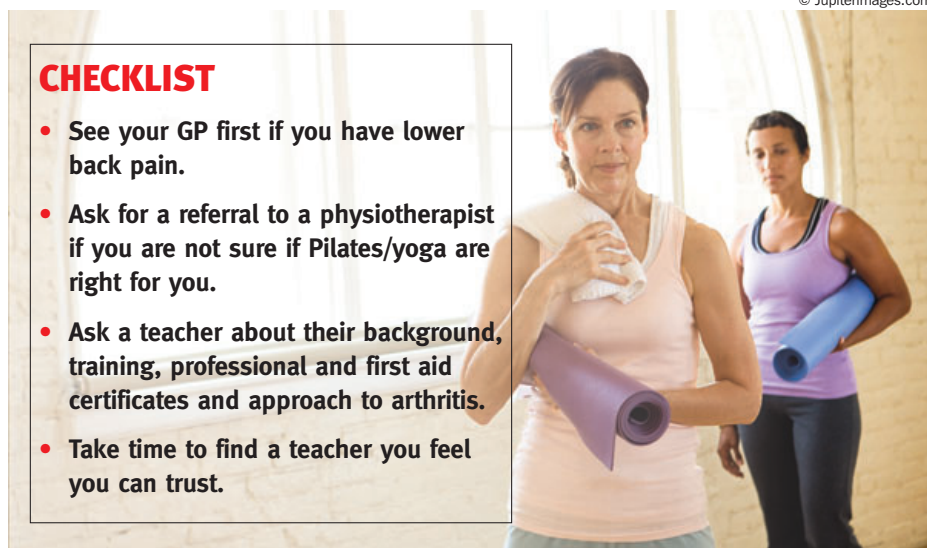
'When you first see the teacher, explain the problems you have and ask what they would suggest for you,' says Philippa. 'This will help you to find out if they know how arthritis affects you and if they will adapt the exercises for you.'

A specialist teacher will help you to work safely according to Robin Monro from the Yoga Biomedical Trust. 'It will also be much easier to relax and feel safe if you have confidence in the teacher.' If you do not feel comfortable with a teacher, look for another. 'Some of the exercises felt a bit uncomfortable at first but the trainer gently encouraged me to stretch a bit more, then a bit more, until I knew I had done enough,' says Yvonne. 'You have to push yourself a bit, but not too much.'

THE BENEFITS OF YOGA

Meditation and relaxation exercises are an integral part of yoga – as much as the movements and postures. Even if you find that the exercises do not work for you, the relaxation part can be useful. 'I tried yoga for three months with one session of two hours per week as recommended by my physiotherapist,' says Steve Meek, 58, who has ankylosing spondylitis that affects his neck. 'I found the relaxation sessions very helpful but I could not get on with some of the positions. I am still doing the relaxation exercises at home and was advised by my GP to try Pilates. I enjoyed talking to others in the class with the same problems.' The relaxation and breathing exercises are central to yoga and can help with pain and stress.

The stretching exercises and postures also help you focus on how you are using your body. 'With rheumatoid arthritis you tend to shrink into yourself when things hurt,' says 65-year-old Christine. 'Yoga helps me to be more aware of how I'm sitting and makes it easier to know how to correct my



CHECKLIST

- **See your GP first if you have lower back pain.**
- **Ask for a referral to a physiotherapist if you are not sure if Pilates/yoga are right for you.**
- **Ask a teacher about their background, training, professional and first aid certificates and approach to arthritis.**
- **Take time to find a teacher you feel you can trust.**

posture. There are social benefits too – that's very important to me.'

THE BENEFITS OF PILATES

Problems with posture and strength around your spine are often part of the ageing process. The benefits of Pilates most often mentioned are greater freedom of movement, less stiffness, and being more aware of how you are using – or misusing your body. You learn how to correct this by changing the way you sit, stand and move. Having arthritis can mean that you try to protect a painful joint by putting less pressure on it – that's fine if it means you properly adapt the way you move, but creates more trouble if too much strain is placed on other joints and muscles. Learning to rebalance your body can prevent further aches and pains.

'I'm now much more conscious of my body – how I am sitting, standing, and walking,' says Philippa. 'I don't get as stiff and aching as I used to. My neck is much better and my knees feel stronger. Pilates helps me to correct the tensions and problems that are a part of having RA'.

It is the same if you have osteoarthritis too. 'Pilates is definitely worth trying,' says Yvonne. 'One exercise that helped my back was to lay on my back with a pillow under my neck for support and my knees raised. I would then slowly raise my back off the floor, going one joint at a time – just very slow and gentle. When you do this, you should pull your stomach muscles in. We had relaxing music in the class and had plenty of time to relax and get settled before starting. We were told to never push too hard and to do things slowly. I did this every other day at home and once week at the class – after a few weeks I suddenly noticed a difference. I wanted it to work so I made sure I stuck at it.'

WHAT YOU CAN DO AT HOME

You may not be able to get to a class or private teacher, or a flare up might make a full session too difficult, not to mention exhausting. 'I do a few exercises at home if I can't get to a class, and I practise almost every day,' says Christine.

You could even start at home – see Arthritis Care's booklet *Exercise and Arthritis*. After being shown some exercises by a Pilates teacher at a local self-help group, Henry Glenister, 74, started doing leg and arm stretches at home each day. 'I began to feel a bit more supple almost straight away and after a couple of months it was easier to get out of bed and up from a chair. I have trapped nerves in my lower back, but my consultant said that even if the exercises caused a bit more pain, they would not damage me as long as I was careful. I find it really helps to keep moving because I don't want to steadily deteriorate and become helpless. That's my motivation.' **an**

USEFUL CONTACTS

- **Yoga Biomedical Trust**
Tel: 020 7689 3040
www.yogatherapy.org
- **British Wheel of Yoga**
Tel: 01529 306851
www.bwy.org.uk
- **Pilates Foundation**
Tel: 020 7033 0078
www.Pilatesfoundation.com
- **Body Control Pilates Association**
Tel: 020 7636 8900
www.bodycontrol.co.uk
- **Register of Exercise Professionals**
Tel: 020 8686 6464
www.exerciseregister.org