

The gentle stretch

Pilates is a subtle and relaxing form of exercise that improves posture, balance and flexibility - at whatever age you take it up. By Linda Kelsev

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the death of Joseph Pilates at the age of 87. During his lifetime the form of exercise he invented was practised mostly by professional dancers who used Pilates to help heal the inevitable injuries that affect ballet performers, as well as to counteract the long-term physical effects of a life dedicated to dance. If Joseph Pilates were alive today he would be justifiably proud to see how Pilates has proliferated in the past decade to become almost as popular as yoga.

Unlike most forms of fashionable exercise - from aerobics to spinning - which seem to be aimed at the young and often already fit, you can practise Pilates throughout your life, and it is never too late to get started.

The Heath Robinson-style apparatus you find in a Pilates studio lies at the heart of Joseph Pilates's work. Born in Germany in 1880, Pilates grew up suffering numerous ailments including asthma and rickets. He was fascinated by

anatomy and fanatical about fitness, yoga included, so much so that by the age of 14 he was in good enough shape to model for anatomy charts.

Legend has it that he arrived in England in 1912 as either a boxer or circus performer - or both. [Still here at the outbreak of the First World War, he was interned on the Isle of Man where he started to use his knowledge to help nurse his fellow internees at the same time as teaching them karate and self-defence.](#) To aid rehabilitation of bed-bound patients he devised resistance equipment using bed-springs and straps - the basis of the equipment still used today.

After the war Pilates emigrated to the United States and together with his wife, Clara, set up a studio in New York. The city's ballet community adopted the Pilates method as a way of building strength, suppleness and elongation of muscles, while avoiding bulk.

Alan Herdman, now in his mid-

sixties, was the first person to introduce Pilates to the UK, more than 30 years ago. Still teaching daily at his London studio, as well as training new Pilates instructors, he has recently written *Pilates Plus, Grown-up Pilates for 50+*, which would be the perfect introduction for anyone feeling a little nervous of heading straight for the studio. Illustrated throughout with real-life models aged from their fifties to their seventies, it will convince the cynics that Pilates for the older generation is no mere marketing ploy.

"I work with a lot of people who have had hip replacements," says Herdman, "but ideally they would come to me well in advance of an operation, which will speed up the healing process later on. A while back I worked with an opera singer who had had knee replacements and had been offered the lead in Sweeney Todd at the Royal Opera House. [Throughout the performance she had to go up and down stairs and she didn't think her knees could take it.](#) We constructed a staircase in the studio, gave her special exercises and a six-month programme. She was able to accept the role."

Pilates movements are all performed slowly and deliberately. *

FROZEN SHOULDER Arm circles for stiff shoulders



1 Stand beside a chair with your right foot in front of your left foot and your right hand holding the chair back. Bend forward from the hips, letting your left arm hang loosely down and dropping your head.

2 Circle your left arm in a clockwise direction three or four times, then reverse the movement and circle in an anticlockwise direction a few times. Reverse your position and repeat exercise on right arm.

Don't try to circle your arms right around the joint. Only exercise within the range of movement that feels comfortable and don't let your shoulder 'click'.

*« Many exercises are devoted to strengthening the muscles of the abdomen, hips and buttocks so they can provide stability and support for the rest of the body. "It's much better to complete one perfect movement than 10 haphazard ones," says Herdman.

With the proliferation of Pilates studios and no formal national accreditation for teachers, there is a growing concern among professionals about standards. With more and more mat classes that don't use equipment, Alan Herdman thinks mat work is an acceptable substitute for work with the apparatus, providing you're mobile enough to get up and down from the floor. But before joining it's essential, he says, to see a mat class in action, talk to the teacher and see if you would feel comfortable with both the class and the amount of individual attention. Be wary, he warns, of a mat class with more than eight students.

Actress Helena Bonham Carter has described Pilates as "a plastic surgeon for the body, but without the

plastic - or indeed the surgery". A technician at the Osteoporosis Screening Unit at Guy's Hospital, put it slightly differently. "Along with the bone scan you are measured and weighed. Most patients with osteoporosis shrink, but some of the patients actually grow between one screening and the next. Invariably they're the ones who do Pilates."

Bill Freedman, theatrical producer and chairman of Black Diamond Films, which makes TV programmes about extreme sports, is 77. He has been described as the Victor Kiam of Pilates, the man who liked the product so much he bought the company. In Freedman's case, he opened his own studio, Pilates Central, in Islington last year. "I walk in and ask people how they are. I feel so proud when they reply, 'I'm so much better.'"

Freedman himself took up Pilates many years ago after visiting Canyon Ranch spa in Arizona. "My ankles were killing me, a result of playing a lot of tennis. Pilates cured my aches and pains and I still play tennis."

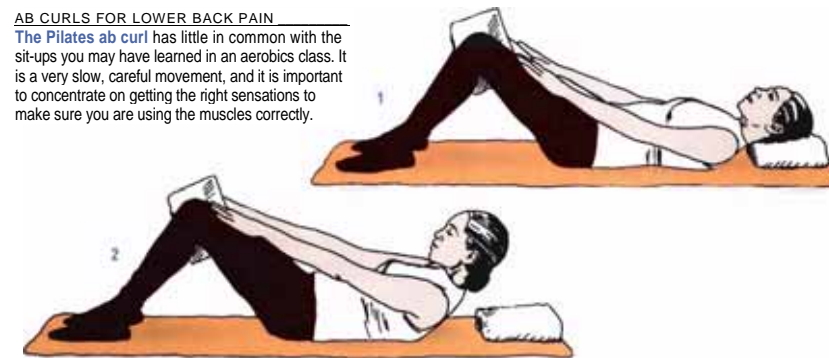
More information at [alanherdmanpilates.co.uk](#) Pilates Plus is published by Gaia Books at £14.99. Save money by ordering through Saga books, see page 196

Coming up for 50, Christian Testorf was heading for a classic midlife crisis. A stressed-out executive, he was unhappy at work, overweight, drinking too much and dining out late with business colleagues. [A year later he has left his job, re-trained as a Pilates coach and became a teacher at the Royal Automobile Club in Pall Mall.](#) "I had a major back operation in my late twenties. Now, when my back starts to play up, thanks to Pilates the recovery is substantially faster. The best thing is knowing I can help myself rather than rushing off to the osteopath. I can honestly say I'm healthier than I was 20 years ago."

While celebrities from Sir Ian McKellen to Oprah Winfrey extol the virtues of Pilates, Alan Herdman puts it into perspective. "Pilates has become very fashionable - and it's sold as a cure-all. But don't expect miracles, it takes a lot of patience, and it doesn't happen overnight. Pilates is not for people who expect instant gratification, which is why it's ideal for older people."

AB CURLS FOR LOWER BACK PAIN

The Pilates ab curl has little in common with the sit-ups you may have learned in an aerobics class. It is a very slow, careful movement, and it is important to concentrate on getting the right sensations to make sure you are using the muscles correctly.



1 Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place a folded towel between your knees and another one under your head. Rest your hands on your thighs. If you have trouble keeping your back flat, rest your lower legs on a chair. Relax your shoulders and breathe in.

2 As you breathe out, pull your abdominals toward the floor. Slide your hands up toward your knees and move your shoulder blades slightly down your back as you lift your upper torso and head off the floor. Curl your ribs forward in the direction of your thighs, but don't feel you have to lift very far; a small lift is fine. Breathe in to curl back down again. Repeat 10 times.

IMHIMHDid you feel any strain in your lower back? Be sure that you don't start to curl until you can feel that your abdominals are engaged. Keep your neck soft and curl up from the abdomen; don't pull up with your head and shoulders.

Exercises taken from Pilates Plus: Grown-up Pilates for 50+ by Alan Herdman with Gill Paul