

Pilates - Exercise and Ostomates



"The attainment and maintenance of a uniformly developed body with a sound mind, fully capable of naturally performing our many daily tasks with spontaneous zest and pleasure."
Joseph Pilates

You may have heard of Pilates (pronounced pi-la-tiz) and the benefits this type of exercise has to offer. Having a colostomy has never stopped me from taking and teaching regular exercise and that includes the Pilates method.

The Pilates method of exercise, was developed in the early 20th century by a man called Joseph Pilates. There are many people who follow these exercises and many instructors teaching them in the United Kingdom.

The exercises focus on the core postural muscles which help keep the body balanced and help to provide support for the spine. In particular, Pilates exercises teach awareness of breathing and alignment of the spine, and aim to strengthen the deep torso muscles which keep your tummy and back stronger and can sometimes help in preventing an abdominal hernia.

As a colostomate of five years and a Pilates Instructor, I have found this type of exercise to be especially suitable for me, as the movements can be fairly easily adapted to suit the individual and can be very gentle and non-threatening. I was lucky to recover from the surgery within a short time frame and was teaching again after 12 weeks. It felt quite scary facing a room full of people who were all looking at me and I was concerned they would all be able to see my colostomy bag! In fact only a few people knew what operation I had undergone and other people had no idea as the bag could not be seen (even in skin tight Lycra)! My worst fear was the stoma making one of its unannounced loud sounds that remind me of an elephant. But most of the time I could sense when this was about to happen and put my hand over the stoma to muffle the sound. Obviously undergoing any major abdominal surgery is going to affect your ability to exercise, but my stoma has never stopped me doing all the things I did before I had it. I'm just very careful to exercise sensibly, cautiously and most of all within my capabilities.

The Pilates mat program follows a set pattern, with exercises following on from one another in a natural progression. Beginners start with basic movements and build up to include additional exercises and more advanced movements.

People who enjoy Pilates say they stay with the program because it's diverse and interesting. You can do fewer repetitions of a number of exercises rather than lots of repetitions of only a few. Joseph Pilates intended his exercises to be something people could do on their own once they've had proper instruction, cutting down the need to remain dependent on a trainer.

If you decide to try out a session, get the most out of your Pilates workout by thinking about the following:-

- **Focus Your Mind** - Pilates is designed to combine breathing with your body's movements. Instructors teach ways to keep breathing and working together with the exercises. You will also be taught to concentrate on your muscles and what you are doing, aiming to unite your mind and body, which can also help to relieve stress and anxiety.

- **Be Comfortable** - Wear comfortable clothes (as you would for yoga - shorts or track suit bottoms and a T-shirt are good choices) and usually Pilates is done without shoes. If you start feeling uncomfortable, strained, or experience pain, you should stop (as with any exercise).

- **Flow** - When you perform your exercises, avoid quick, jerky movements. Every movement should be slow, but still strong and flexible. Joseph Pilates worked with dancers and designed his movements to flow.

- **Enjoy!** - The nice thing about Pilates is you don't have to break into a sweat if you don't want to. Pilates is primarily about strength and flexibility, so combining other types of exercise is just as important. As well as Pilates try to incorporate a form of aerobic exercise like swimming or brisk walking 2 or 3 times a week.

If you are interested in participating in a session, check with your local leisure centre (details can usually be found on your local council's website) as they will have a whole list of things you can try that include Pilates. Your local Primary Care Trust should have a list of Health Walks in your area – a great way to get fit and meet some new people.

If this article inspires you to try Pilates, start slowly and steadily, trying not to overdo anything, until you find a level you are comfortable with. Some gyms have specialist programmes for people recovering from surgery or with specific types of illness, disability or medical condition. You may wish to discuss this with your GP, Practice Nurse or Stoma Care Nurse, as they may be able to refer you onto one of these schemes.

On a positive note, the benefits of regular exercise are many, regardless of having a stoma or not! You should aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate (non-intensive) physical activity five days a week. Moderate exercise can include going for a gentle walk, or doing some gardening. However, if you have been inactive for a long period of time, try to build up to 30 minutes a day over the course of several weeks. Also, avoid high-impact exercises, such as sports that involve hard jolts to your body, for example football or squash. Remember to always start an activity slowly and gently, always warming up before you start and cooling down at the end.

When you feel the time is right for you to start exercising, I am happy to talk to you in person via email or phone. I can be contacted via the Colostomy Association on: 0118 939 1537. I am also happy to talk to any fitness professional that wants to know more about exercise and stomas.

Whatever you want to try, keep to a few simple rules, but most of all enjoy!

Bronwen Lowy

Check with your GP or SCN before you commence any exercise programme.

- Start slowly
- Go at your own pace and listen to your body
- Stop when you've had enough.
- Enjoy the experience!
- Don't feel intimidated.

Please remember to always ensure that you have checked with your medical practitioner before you commence any type of sport or physical activity.