



More than Muscle Tone: How Pilates Can Decrease Neck & Back Pain

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If you wake up with aches and pains, you're not alone. That's the case for at least [half of U.S. adults](#) who are living with musculoskeletal conditions that cause back, neck and joint pain. Not only are these aches and pains annoying in the day-to-day, but they can limit your mobility and decrease your quality of life.

That's where Pilates comes in.

Not your first thought for a go-to pain relief strategy, right? You may think of Pilates as a yoga-like workout that can tone and slim muscles, but Pilates provides benefits well beyond that.

Pilates is a system of movements that improve muscular strength, flexibility, and posture. In fact, when German physical trainer Joseph Pilates developed this workout technique back in the 1920s, his goal was to help dancers and soldiers rehabilitate from their injuries.

So much about this practice makes it a near-perfect way to align, strengthen, and provide pain relief to your body. Here's how:

Pilates strengthens your core (and more)

Lynda Gehrman, founder and director at Physio Logic Pilates & Movement, says that the philosophy behind Pilates is fine-tuning your ability to control your muscles with your mind. By overpowering your automatic reflex patterns, you take control over the way your body is moving.

This whole control of movement comes from your **core**. Your core includes all the muscles between your shoulders and your hips that help you keep balance. Having a strong core can increase your overall body strength according to Laura Arndt, certified Pilates instructor and CEO of Matriarc. By strengthening your core, you increase your range of motion, stabilize your body, and can decrease pain in your back, neck, shoulders, and joints as a result.

But Pilates doesn't stop at building a strong core: it works the entire body.

Having **muscle imbalances**, where you underuse or overuse certain muscles throughout your body, is linked with experiencing common musculoskeletal pain. Your stronger muscles start overcompensating for weaker ones, and it can throw off your body's properly aligned movement.

"That's why targeting and exercising a variety of muscle groups is so important," says Arndt. "That is something that we focus on in Pilates. When we work one part of your body, we're going to work opposing muscle groups." By using Pilates moves, you're helping your muscles work together in proper movement, potentially alleviating pain from imbalances.

Pilates adapts *with* you

Pilates is customizable and can easily adapt to your current fitness level. While the intensity of each exercise itself may stay the same, you can add on repetitions and increase the time of your sessions as your muscles strengthen. Since the movements are small and low-impact,

it's unlikely it will cause joint pain (just that good muscle burn we all love!).

According to Gehrman and Arndt, Pilates is a natural and cost-effective way to safely restore mobility and strength.

Let's prepare you for your next workout! Here are some tips that show you the proper way to do two popular Pilates moves:

Since Pilates puts a big focus on moving with the breath, be sure to sync your movements with the inhale and exhale cues below.

1. THE PELVIC CURL

Goals: Improve spinal articulation and flexibility, strengthen abdominals and hip extensors (hamstrings/glutes.) Great as a warm-up, postural exercise.

Exhale: Initiate by drawing the abdominals in towards the spine, pressing the lower back into the mat. Begin lifting the spine off the mat from the tailbone up.

Inhale: hold here

Exhale: soften the chest. Roll down the spine one vertebrae at a time.



Image is courtesy of Lynda Gehrman, founder and director at Physio Logic Pilates & Movement.

Tips:

*keep shoulders pressed open, and for assistance, press down in the hands to activate the triceps.

*Push evenly through the feet, not from the heels.

*Align the feet so they are parallel.

2. THE BACK EXTENSION

Goals: This move will strengthen and mobilize the upper back muscles and triceps as well as stabilize the pelvis and hip muscles.

Inhale: support spine by engaging your abs. As you lift hands and feet open shoulders, reaching palms of hands alongside thighs.

Exhale: extend the spine long and hold here.

Inhale: Lower the spine maintaining the shoulders open and the palms touching the thighs.

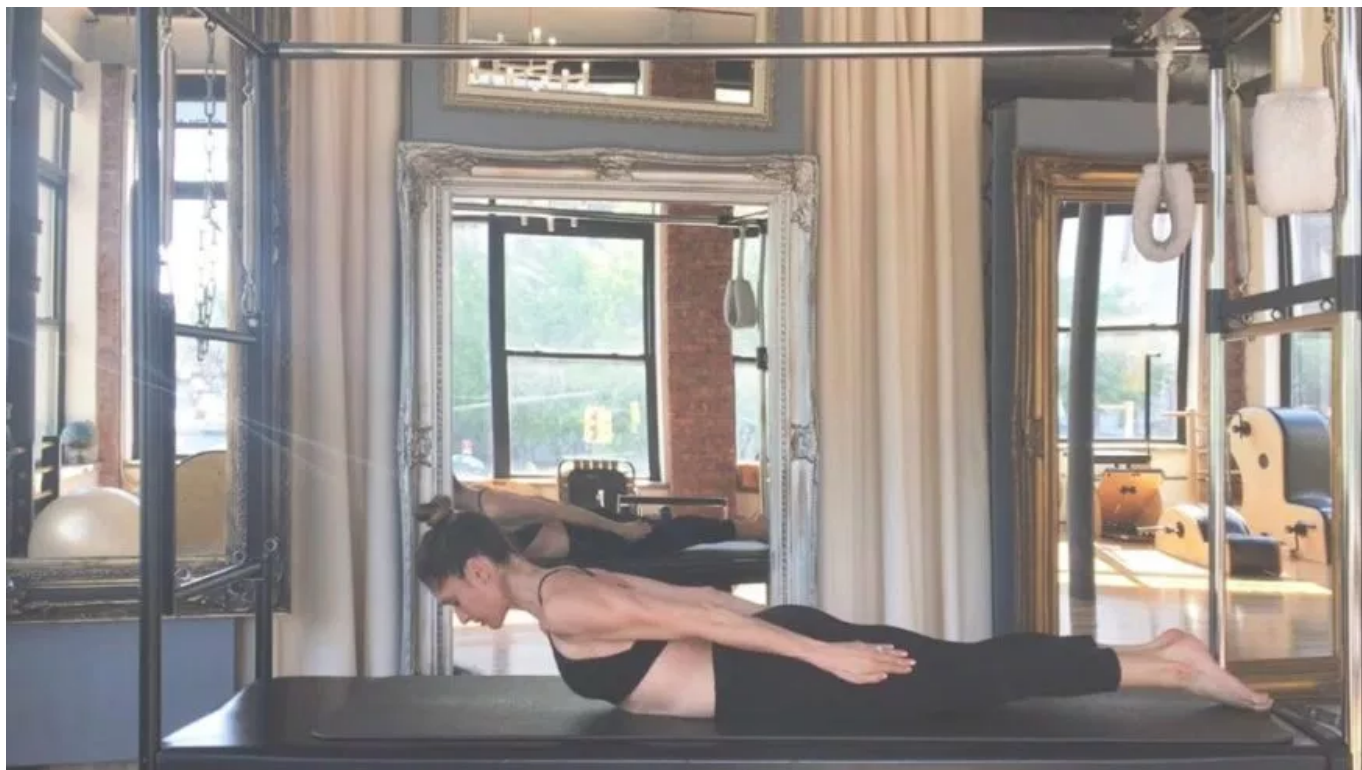


Image is courtesy of Lynda Gehrman, founder and director at Physio Logic Pilates & Movement.

If you're new to this practice, we recommend taking a beginner class. There's nothing like getting attention from an instructor firsthand to build your knowledge and confidence when you're trying new techniques.

Have you tried Pilates before? What do you love about it? Share in the comments below!

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