

## Pilates: Interesting History

The hottest vehicle for average men and women to reach their perfect-body plateaus is not a "new" trend at all.

In recent years, the Pilates Method has experienced an explosion of popularity across North America, Asia, and Europe. Developed in the early 20th century by German national Joseph Pilates, the Pilates Method is a relatively simple form of physical fitness. Originally named "The Art of Contrology", the basic concept of Pilates was using the mind to control the muscles. From there, the idea evolved into a more complex exercise program, with great attention paid to the core postural muscles. It is believed that these core muscles help keep the body balanced, as they provide support for the spine.

Joseph Pilates developed the initial Pilates Method during the World War I, when he and other German nationals were placed under forced internment in Lancaster, England. As a trained nurse, Pilates had been actively investigating ways to help rehabilitate bed-ridden victims of the 1918 influenza epidemic. Amassing all that he had learned in those twenty years of self-study, Joseph Pilates applied his vast knowledge of yoga, Zen and ancient Greek and Roman physical regimens and created a series of movements that could be practiced within the confines of this controlled environment. He taught these movements and concepts to his fellow camp members and devised the original system of exercises, now known as "mat work". This initial exercise regimen of "contrology" was successfully performed by many of Pilates' fellow WWI detainees in the cramped quarters they shared.

More than a combination of physical movements, the Pilates Method was created from the belief that mental health is essential for physical health, and vice-versa. For this reason, many consider Pilates to be a method of total body conditioning. The movements and physical practices not only strengthen the body, but also emphasize proper alignment, concentration, precision, centering, control, breathing and flowing movements. These basic principles remain the major factors of the modern Pilates Method.

Physical exercise was an important element of Mr. Pilates' concept, although this aspect differed from more traditional regimes. Rather than performing a series of repetitions of each exercise, Joseph Pilates developed a program of precise movements that required form and control. In all, Pilates designed over 500 of these very specific exercises to be included in his Pilates Method. The Pilates 'mat work' exercises are most frequently used, involving a series of callisthenic motions performed on a padded Pilates mat, without the use of apparatus or added weights.

Following his development of the initial mat work exercises, Joseph Pilates designed five major pieces of unique exercise equipment that he claimed would provide optimal results. While these two components of the Pilates Method are often taught and practiced individually now, the original Pilates Method combined both equipment exercises and mat work. Most of the exercises involved in the Pilates Method were developed to create awareness of neutral alignment of the spine. These exercises also strengthen the deep postural muscles that support this alignment, playing a vital role in preventing or alleviating back pain.

Gravity Pilates is a recent development in the Pilates Method. Those who practice gravity Pilates believe that the lower back, abdomen, and buttocks create the body's "powerhouse", and when this area is supported and strengthened, the rest of the body is able to move more freely.

Many people seeking physical fitness and rehabilitation use modern Pilates. While it is a popular exercise program of choice for fitness buffs and Hollywood's elite, the Pilates Method is also used by physical therapists as a rehabilitation exercise. Those practicing Pilates use their own bodies as "weights" to train their bodies and increase strength and flexibility.

While there is nothing "new" about the Pilates Method, the program continues to gain popularity as more and more people discover its many benefits.