FITNESS & EXERCISE

Is Pilates the Right Exercise for You?

Pilates may suit beginners, older adults and some people with back pain, but it cannot provide every kind of exercise your body needs.

You do not need to be a Pilates person

You have seen the classes. Perhaps you have also decided, without stepping inside one, that everyone else will be stronger, steadier or somehow better equipped to belong there. Pilates can look like a club whose rules you missed. The more useful question is simpler: does this form of exercise fit what you need from movement now?

For many people, the answer may be yes. Exercise does not have to be punishing to count, and you can begin slowly if you have not been active. Regular practice matters because your body adapts to the activity it does repeatedly. Small amounts can be useful, while building up gradually helps you improve without pushing too hard at once.

Pilates has particularly encouraging evidence for adults with persistent low back pain. It may also appeal if you want an activity centred on controlled physical work rather than an aerobic pursuit such as running or swimming. But enjoying it matters. You are more likely to make exercise regular when you choose something you actually want to do.

That does not make Pilates a complete fitness plan or a universal answer. Most people benefit from combining aerobic, strength, balance and flexibility exercise. Pilates may occupy part of that picture, depending on the class and your needs, but it should not automatically be asked to fill every space. One activity can be worthwhile without doing everything.

The back-pain evidence stands out

The strongest Pilates-specific case in the supplied evidence concerns chronic low back pain. A 2022 network meta-analysis included 118 trials and 9,710 adults aged 18 to 65. Compared with control groups, nearly every kind of exercise examined improved pain and disability. Pilates had the highest calculated likelihood of reducing both, ahead of several other exercise categories.

That sounds decisive, but rankings need care. They estimate which intervention is most likely to perform best across a network of direct and indirect comparisons. They do not guarantee that Pilates will be best for you, nor do they mean other exercise is pointless. In the same

review, mind-body, core-based and strength exercise also performed well, depending on whether the outcome was pain or disability.

A separate 2020 network meta-analysis also placed Pilates highest for pain among adults with non-specific chronic low back pain. Yet its authors judged the combined evidence to be low quality. Studies varied substantially, and few had a low risk of bias. The finding is promising, not a permission slip to promise relief.

If persistent back pain is the reason you are considering Pilates, exercise may be part of managing it rather than a substitute for understanding it. Stop if you develop pain during exercise or feel unwell. Pain, extreme shortness of breath or dizziness are reasons to stop and seek help right away. A health care provider can help decide what activity fits your health and current ability.

One activity can be worthwhile without doing everything.

Age does not close the door

Older age alone does not put exercise out of reach. Physical activity is good for just about everyone, including older adults, and people who have been inactive can start slowly. Strength work supports muscles; balance activities can help prevent falls; flexibility work helps the body remain limber; and aerobic activity raises breathing and heart rate.

That range is important when deciding where Pilates belongs. Older adults need a mixture of aerobic, muscle-strengthening and balance activities, rather than relying on one preferred class. Varied physical activity improves physical function and lowers the risk of falls or injuries from falls. Pilates may be one part of that mixture, but the evidence provided does not establish it as a replacement for the others.

Your starting point matters more than matching someone else in the room. Exercise needs vary with age and health, and building up slowly is a recurring principle across the guidance. If you have trouble moving or balancing, or you are worried that exercise may not be safe, speak with a health care provider before starting.

The same caution applies if you have not exercised for a while and have health concerns. This is not a reason to rule yourself out. It is a reason to choose an entry point that acknowledges where you are. A class can be popular and still be wrong for you at that moment; a gentler beginning can still be real exercise.

Some claims travel further than the evidence

Pilates is often discussed as though choosing it settles every health question at once. The evidence here does not support that leap. Regular physical activity has broad benefits, including better physical function and sleep and lower risks for several long-term conditions. Those are findings about physical activity generally, not proof that Pilates alone produces every benefit.

Exercise can also help depressive symptoms. A 2023 systematic review and meta-analysis of 41 studies found that aerobic or resistance exercise improved depressive symptoms compared with non-exercising control groups. The effect remained when analysis was restricted to studies with a low risk of bias, although it became smaller. Many trials were small, and methods varied considerably.

That review did not establish Pilates specifically as a treatment for depression. It favoured supervised and group exercise, particularly moderate-intensity aerobic exercise. If Pilates gives you a manageable way to participate in supervised or group movement, that may be useful. But it would be inaccurate to transfer the review's results wholesale to Pilates or present a class as a guaranteed mental-health intervention.

Evidence is also limited for endometriosis. A 2025 review found possible benefits from physical activity and exercise for pain, quality of life and other outcomes, but included only six randomized trials with 251 participants. Reporting was incomplete and studies used different measures. The result supports further research into exercise, not a claim that Pilates treats endometriosis.

Start with a class, a mat and one honest question

Pregnancy does not automatically exclude exercise. A 2022 review drawing on 57 high-level studies found that exercise during pregnancy was not associated with increased maternal or perinatal adverse outcomes and was linked with several benefits. But the appropriate type and intensity should reflect previous fitness, medical history and the characteristics of the pregnancy.

That review examined exercise broadly, not Pilates alone. If you are pregnant, have a health condition, struggle with balance or movement, or are unsure whether exercise is safe, ask your health care provider whether a Pilates class is appropriate for you. The useful question is not simply, "Can I do Pilates?" It is, "What kind of exercise fits my health and starting point?"

If there is no medical reason to check first, choose a beginner session that you are willing to attend rather than the one you think you ought to master. You do not need elaborate equipment to begin exercising. For a basic start, what you need is comfortable clothing and an

exercise mat; if the session provides equipment, ask staff to show you how it is used.

This week, put one beginner option in your diary and place the mat where you will see it. Your first task is not to prove flexibility, erase pain or become a different sort of person. It is to notice whether this is movement you can do safely, enjoy and return to. That is what turns an appealing class into a useful habit.

Where this comes from

- Exercise and Physical Fitness

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseandphysicalfitness.html
- Exercise for Older Adults

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseforolderadults.html
- Benefits of Physical Activity

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/benefits/
- Physical exercise in pregnancy: benefits, risks and prescription.

  Journal of perinatal medicine, 2022 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34478617/
- Best Exercise Options for Reducing Pain and Disability in Adults With Chronic Low Back Pain: Pilates, Strength, Core-Based, and Mind-Body. A Network Meta-analysis.

  The Journal of orthopaedic and sports physical therapy, 2022 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35722759/
- Exercise as medicine for depressive symptoms? A systematic review and meta-analysis with meta-regression.

  British journal of sports medicine, 2023 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36731907/
- Which specific modes of exercise training are most effective for treating low back pain? Network meta-analysis.

  British journal of sports medicine, 2020 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31666220/
- The effectiveness and safety of physical activity and exercise on women with endometriosis: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

  PloS one, 2025 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39946383/