

Get on your Mat & Reformer: Why men should do Pilates

It's not just for yummy mummies. Men are taking up Pilates in increasing numbers because of the clear benefits of the method.

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From left: David Beckham, Daniel Craig and Andy Murray do Pilates
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If you think that Pilates is a gentle form of exercise best left to Lycra-clad yummy mummies on their way to yet another coffee morning, think again. Fitness experts now believe that if there is one form of exercise that men of all ages should be doing, it's this one. And with its benefits of increased core strength, improved posture and better balance and flexibility, it should come as no surprise to learn that the number of male participants in Pilates classes is rising. "There's still a preconception — incorrectly — that Pilates is a 'women's workout'," says Justin Rogers, the creative director at Ten Health & Fitness, a chain of Pilates studios with branches in several London locations. "That perception is changing. We are seeing more men in classes year on year." About 17 per cent of participants in classes at Ten Pilates are male, rising to 60 per cent for its sessions in the City.

Roger adds, "Men tend to take it up because of a specific issue such as back pain or tight hamstrings," he says. "They are unsure about it working at first because they are used to activity that makes them sweat, but once they see the effects they are more dedicated to it than the women I teach."

Rather than being an easy option, Pilates has always been about building strength. Joseph Pilates had a background in self-defence and boxing, and opened his "body-conditioning gym" in New York in 1926 to teach people how to achieve strength through better body control. Elite athletes have long loved it —

David Beckham, Andy Murray and Tiger Woods are fans. Pilates is also incorporated into the training regimens of professional rugby players — the England, Wales and New Zealand rugby union teams rely on its ability to build strength and offset injury, and members of the London Irish squad are regulars at Ten Fitness Pilates classes.

And yet, says the physiotherapist Matt Todman, the director of Six Physio clinics (where Pilates is taught by physiotherapists and men make up a third of their classes), it has taken a while for men to choose to do Pilates at the gym. “A lot of men have thought it is just about stretching gently on a mat, but if you do it correctly and it is taught well, Pilates is nothing like that,” he says. “It’s the kind of activity that doesn’t leave you on your knees and out of breath. But it’s deceptive, as you feel it two days later, when your muscles ache because you have worked so hard.”

In contrast to yoga — which Todman says can leave you feeling good, but being “overstretched” to the point where injuries are sometimes more likely to happen — Pilates improves functional stability and control. With the aim of lengthening tight muscles and strengthening weakened muscles so that they maintain healthy posture, it can help to alleviate a wide range of problems, from lower back pain to shoulder issues.

Studies have proved that it works. Last year a paper in the International Journal of Sports, Exercise and Training Science found that men who did a one-hour Pilates class three times a week for ten weeks experienced significant gains in strength that enabled them to improve their step-up and leg-press performance. A trial published in the journal Applied Science Research three years ago showed that regular Pilates improved the leg strength, gait and walking speed of men in their sixties and older — important in the prevention of falls. “Physiotherapists prescribe it because it can have real long-term benefits,” Todman says. He believes that the best results come with classes that use equipment such as Reformers machines and Trapeze tables, which target the core muscles with intense movements. But he is evangelical about the effects of Pilates in general. “It’s a method that has medical backing,” he says. “Provided they have the right instruction and do it regularly, there are few men who won’t benefit.”



Double Leg Stretch-part of the “Abdominal series”.