

HEALTH

BY CAROLYN REUBEN

Exercising Caution



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Quentin Josephy stays flexible.

When David Feldman was discharged from the hospital following major back surgery, he was frightened and depressed. He couldn't bend his back — in fact, he could barely move. The advice of the hospital's physical therapist was all too brief, delivered in two general-information sessions with a group of post-operative patients, after which Feldman was handed a sheet of paper showing back exercises. He was 30 years old and an invalid. Yet, five months later, he felt like a new man.

Luckily for Feldman, a physician referred him to a system of progressive-resistance training and body conditioning developed by a German immigrant, the late Joseph Pilates, more than 60 years ago. Pilates' exercises are done both on the floor and on unusual but effective pieces of equipment designed to strengthen muscles without adding bulk, increase flexibility, extend range of motion, and prolong endurance. Probably the most commonly used of his equipment is the Universal Reformer, which consists of a wooden frame around a spring-controlled horizontal carriage. Loops of leather are used to support the arms or legs while the person using the equipment lies on his or her back. The device's unique design allows an injured person to work out and strengthen the entire body without stressing the injured part, even if that part is the back.

Unlike most fitness workouts, use of this device doesn't elevate the heart rate. But, according to instructor Quentin Josephy of the Self-Regulation Studios in West L.A. and the Kinetic Fitness Studio in Tarzana, the Pilates program is based on yoga, so it includes breathing exercises that can improve a person's respiratory capacity.

Josephy was a professional dancer who, like so many in the American dance community, discovered that Pilates really knew how to keep a dancer in shape while rehabilitating an injury. Today, a number of professional dance troupes, including the Houston and San Francisco ballet companies, use Pilates' equipment when injuries occur.

Actually, only one studio, located in New York, owns the rights to the name "Pilates Studio," so Josephy calls his training Kinetic Feedback. Claire Nettle, who owns Studio C in Beverly Hills, tactfully describes her work as "incorporating the teaching and equipment developed in the 1920s" with some modern variations.

"If anyone is recovering from an injury, this method uses precision and control that

you don't often find in other methods," says Nettle. "The beauty of the program is that it is adaptable to any fitness level. In one class I may have someone who is 63 years old, who has crippling arthritis and postural problems, and in the same class the same work can also accommodate a world-class athlete. They work side by side." According to Nettle, the system is especially good for people who, like Feldman, have had a laminectomy — a surgery to remove a disc and fuse two vertebrae in the spine — because "it at least develops some degree of flexibility."

Unlike the machines found in most health clubs, Pilates equipment requires the person to work on the entire body, not just one muscle group. For example, if a knee has been injured or operated upon, the trainer will guide the person to strengthen calf and thigh muscles surrounding the knee, as well as the back, shoulders and arms. The equipment emphasizes functionally related muscles — for example, the quadriceps in the front of the thigh and the hamstrings in the back of the thigh. Doing the Pilates training will not make you look like a body builder, yet it can make you supple and strong, like a cat whose strength is in sleek and well-toned muscles, not large ones.

Another big difference between the Pilates-based system of rehabilitation and many other machine-based programs is the intensity of involvement of the instructor with the student. You don't just jump aboard and begin your workout in this program. "It is very, very instructor-oriented," says Josephy.

This makes the right match between student and trainer particularly important. There is no certification procedure for people desiring to teach a Pilates-based program, however. Instruction is handed down from one person to another, so expertise among instructors can vary considerably. "It's very difficult for the consumer to judge," Josephy admits.

Still, for an injured person who has exhausted the benefits of traditional physical therapy, or the well person who desires a full-body workout with careful personal attention and instruction, Joseph Pilates' method can become a seductive addiction. "Without the method," says a delighted Feldman, "I wouldn't be normal. I'd like to keep doing it as long as I can." □

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