

## Say Yes to Yogalates

Both yoga and Pilates promote healing benefits

*By Lauren Fritsky*

Grappling to decide whether or not to commit to yoga or Pilates classes for your New Year's fitness makeover?

Some PTs recommend you try both.

More and more gyms and fitness facilities plan to offer combination classes of Pilates and yoga, sometimes called yogalates, to their clients this year. In addition to the health benefits, both activities support PT by targeting different parts of the body.

### **Benefits of Both**

"I think one of the reasons that PTs are starting to use more of these interventions with Pilates and with yoga is we're seeing patients that may attend gyms with these classes," said Kerstin Palombaro, PhD, PT, a certified Hatha yoga instructor and community engagement coordinator in the Institute for Physical Therapy Education at Widener University in Chester, PA. "We're trying to move in the direction of health and wellness promotion; we're trying to move into more preventive care. If we're using shorter visit patterns than we used to 10 years ago due to insurance restrictions and we're also trying to get patients to be more independent, it makes sense to choose interventions like yoga and Pilates."

People traditionally look to yoga to improve balance, flexibility and strength and reduce stress. Pilates focuses more on the core, the collection of different muscles that stabilize the spine and pelvis and run the entire length of the torso. Individuals can do both activities on a mat and in private or class settings, though Pilates can also employ the use of equipment such as bars.

The two activities can actually help one another, Dr. Palombaro said. Pilates' focus on core strength can assist with yoga postures, while the stability and stretching emphasized in yoga can aid Pilates exercises.

"I think that one of the reasons the combination of yoga and Pilates—those yogalates courses—works is that with yoga you're doing a lot more with flexibility, balance and lower-extremity strength, yet with Pilates, the intense focus is on core strength," Dr. Palombaro said. "Yoga instructors are always reminding their students to contract their abdominal muscles."

Chantal Donnelly, PT, a faculty member of the Doctor of Physical Therapy program at Mount Saint Mary's College in California and a Pilates instructor who treats patients privately in Pasadena, said she's recommended Pilates as PT for many diagnoses.

"From patients with low-back pain to knee pain, shoulder dysfunctions, ankle weakness, incontinence, scoliosis, osteoporosis, post-stroke, MS and Parkinson's disease, there doesn't seem to be any limit to the types of patients who can benefit from Pilates," she said. "Pilates helps my patients by improving trunk stability, body awareness, muscle balance, breathing mechanics, posture and spine flexibility. It is also a great tool for neuromuscular reeducation of faulty motor patterns."

### **Helping the Youth**

Most 18-year-olds don't contemplate how their bodies might feel in 60 years. But both Dr. Palombaro and Donnelly said that when started early in life, Pilates and yoga can form the basis for a healthy mind and body as people age.

"My instructor always says that yoga is the gift that you give to your 80-year-old self," Dr. Palombaro said. "It is true that what you're doing now will hopefully have long-term benefits."

Those benefits include staying trim and fit, sustaining flexibility and balance and retaining proper posture. The mind-body connection can also work to individuals' advantage as they get older. Donnelly, who calls yoga and Pilates "meditation in motion," said each exercise's precise, focused movements increase awareness of the body and can decrease mental stress and anxiety.

"Both Pilates and yoga bring conscious awareness to physical tension and imbalances in the body," she said. "This is an invaluable tool to have in your twenties, because it will potentially prevent you from falling into bad postural habits that lead to pain syndromes later on in life."

While some people gravitate toward Pilates after trying yoga, or vice versa, Donnelly said that there's not necessarily a progression from one activity to the other. People should try both, and while women make up a good portion of Pilates classes, men can benefit as well. According to a 2003 article published in USA Today, professional male athletes like golfer Tiger Woods and basketball star Jason Kidd use Pilates to improve their strength, posture and flexibility.

"For starters, Joseph Pilates (the founder of Pilates) was a guy," Donnelly said. "A lot of the renowned master teachers of yoga and Pilates are men. In general, I find that men don't like to stretch and they don't like to strengthen their hips either. So, yoga and Pilates are great for men, because they are pushed in a direction that might not be in their natural comfort zone."

### **Masterful Modification**

In terms of treating elderly clients, said Donnelly, both yoga and Pilates can help to improve two big problem areas in that population: posture and balance.

"There have been some studies now looking at how yoga, tai chi and Pilates improve balance and core strength," she said. "Those studies look at balance and fall risk factors in the elderly. In general, studies are showing that balance, decreased risk of falling and improved core strength occur with tai chi and yoga."

"I would have to say that any yoga or Pilates instructor should be able to make modifications based on any limitation you might have, whether you're a younger athlete coming in with a knee injury, or if you have a disability and can't do prolonged standing or twisting poses," Dr. Palombaro said. "There are modifications that can be made to all poses. If your instructor is unable to make those modifications, chances are it's not that the discipline isn't for you, you just need to find a different instructor."

For Pilates, devices such as the reformer allow older patients with limitations to work on trunk stabilization in a supine position. The springs and straps on the reformer can facilitate and guide movements the user might not otherwise be able to accomplish. Donnelly uses a "clinical reformer" that sits higher up from the floor so patients can easily get on and off the machine.

Yoga, Dr. Palombaro said, can be adapted into chair stretches or more seated poses. For her home health geriatric patients, she does some yoga poses mainly to work on balance and challenge their center of gravity. Some postures she employs include the warrior pose, which includes a lunging stance, and other one-legged standing poses.

"I don't necessarily tell them it's yoga," Dr. Palombaro admitted. "But they are doing yoga."

In developing a treatment plan for clients using yoga and Pilates, Dr. Palombaro said PTs still must take into account an individual's preferences and limitations.

"With anything, anybody's different," she said. "When you're coming up with a treatment plan, certainly picking and choosing from Pilates and yoga, it's no different than picking and choosing from any other PT intervention, as far as I'm concerned."

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