

How to Choose Between Yoga and Pilates

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Last Updated: September 16, 2021

Are you deciding whether to book yoga class or Pilates class? Are you confused about the differences between these two? There are several different factors that you should be thinking about if you are deciding which is your preferred type of exercise. You may be thinking of taking up a relatively new type of exercise and are finding it difficult to decide between yoga and Pilates. The one that you choose will become a part of your life and the decision you will make will depend on the results that you would like to attain.

Part
1

Part 1 of 3: Clarifying Your Goals



1 Are you looking for physical rehabilitation? Both yoga and Pilates can offer help in rebounding physically. For example, for individuals with physical injuries, Pilates has been a tried and true method of reducing physical pain and recovering from injury.^[1] Yoga, on the other hand, has been often used as part of mental and emotional rehabilitation.

- Yoga can be an excellent exercise for rehabilitation, sometimes better than pilates depending on your particular needs. A very experienced, knowledgeable yoga instructor can help you build strength and flexibility, choose exercises that fit your abilities, and how to modify exercises if you need to.
- Yoga classes can vary a lot, depending on the focus, teacher, or yoga studio. There are classes designed for chair-bound seniors in nursing homes, meditative yoga, yoga for preschoolers, and classes that Olympic-caliber athletes attend. Pilates is not quite as diverse in its presentation.



2 **Decide whether toning your body is a concern to you.** Yoga and Pilates are both wonderful for toning and strengthening all of the muscles groups in your body. Pilates tends to have a greater focus on muscle toning. For example, if you are trying to lose weight, you could try Pilates exercises using different Pilates machine which add the cardio and fitness element to your Pilates poses and will help you to burn additional calories. There are no machines in yoga practice.^[2]



3 **Think about what mental health improvement you want from your exercise.** Yoga has been known to have a lot of beneficial effects on mental health. Doing yoga will calm your sympathetic nervous system, helping with stress, and your hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal axis, which controls hormone levels.

EXPERT TIP



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Our Expert Agrees: Yoga will help you work on your balance and flexibility more than Pilates will, and you'll do a lot more twisting. In addition, yoga is great for stress relief, and it can even help you improve your focus. Even more than that, however, yoga is a spiritual practice that allows you to get in touch with yourself.



4 Consider whether the pursuit of spirituality is something you want out of exercise. Yoga is an ancient practice that often involves exploring spirituality. Meditation is a large part of yoga. Yoga and Pilates involve the alignment of the body and the mind, but Pilates will not add focus on the spirit to this unlike yoga.^[3]

- On the other hand, yoga can also be done without a large focus on spirituality, if that's not your thing. When it comes time to choose a class, if yoga interests you but spirituality does not, you can look for a more secular yoga class.

Part 2 of 3: Understanding the Main Differences



1 Read on the origins of both practices. You might find it beneficial in your deciding process to research online on the origins of yoga and Pilates.^[4] Some of the main points of interest include:

- Yoga started over 5000 years ago in India. What is colloquially referred to as yoga is actually part of a larger philosophy and way of life. It was invented to promote a better understanding of oneself and the alignment of the mind, body, and spirit.
- Pilates was invented in the early 20th century as a method of body rehabilitation and strengthening. It started as a tool to rehabilitate World War I soldiers, but it took off when dancers started using it to increase their dancing performance.



2 Evaluate the different focuses of both practices. Yoga and Pilates are similar in a lot of ways. They both include movements and poses intended to increase strength, flexibility, and the mind body connection. Ultimately though, yoga is a practice focused on your mind and how you feel, with strength and flexibility coming as a side effect. Pilates is a practice focused on toning your body and bettering your posture and movement.[5]



- 3 Weigh the differences in how breath is used differently in yoga and Pilates.** [6] The breathing techniques you use in Pilates and yoga differ quite a bit.
- With Pilates, the breath is used more as a technique of providing the muscles with the energy they need to exercise effectively. Concentrating on the breathing technique throughout Pilates will help you to manage the quantity of oxygen coming into the body and travelling to the muscles to help them become more relaxed.
 - In yoga, the breathing exercises help you to achieve relaxation. Throughout yoga routines it is important to continuously concentrate on how the breath is being employed. Sending the breath to areas that may be tight or are holding stress can help to relax these specific muscle groups in your body.



4 Evaluate your desire to improve your flexibility. One of the main differences between yoga and Pilates is that yoga can be used for improving the flexibility of the body and it will also gradually increase the flexibility of your joints. Stretching and holding static poses is a central theme in yoga. Pilates is more dynamic, and while flexibility will improve in Pilates, it's not a focus.^[7] However, it is highly recommended to stretch after Pilates, which can improve your flexibility. Online Pilates instructors (such as Cassey Ho from Blogilates) will offer stretch videos to follow after workouts.



5 Decide how important increasing strength is to you. Pilates focuses on trying to relax muscles which are tense and provide strengthening of the numerous muscles of the body. Unlike yoga, Pilates includes the use of resistance machines in addition to mat exercises, making it much more similar to weight training than yoga is.[8]

- Yoga and Pilates both contain several poses that are suitable for toning the abdominal muscles. However, Pilates exercises are a lot more intense and results may be achieved much quicker than they might be if practicing yoga. Through frequent Pilates exercises, a flatter and firmer stomach can be achieved.



6 Evaluate the differences in mental benefits between yoga and pilates. Understand that yoga will focus on your mind more. Exercise has been proven helpful for individuals who are suffering from depression or anxiety. Yoga might be the most effective exercise to combat the illness because it focuses on the mind and spirit as well as the body. Quiet reflection and meditation are a large part of yoga practice. Many people start yoga with reducing stress as their main goal.



1 Try Pilates in your home. Although it's impossible to get the full Pilates experience at home, you can get an idea of what it's like. Perhaps the best way to get started with Pilates at home is to use YouTube. YouTube has a wealth of free videos of instructors giving beginner lessons in basic Pilates exercises.^[9]

- One thing you can't get out of home pilates exercise is the use of machines, so keep that in mind.



2 Try yoga in your home. Nothing more is needed for yoga than some space and free time, which makes it a great exercise to get started with at home. You may find purchasing a mat to be helpful but it's not necessary. Search online for instructions on how to perform basic poses and postures. There are many video as well as text tutorials that will allow you to get a feel for what yoga practice is like.



3 Look for classes near you. If you wish, you can continue to practice yoga or pilates at home, without ever stepping foot in a class. However, finding a good class might help you get the full yoga or pilates experience, and get the most out of the exercise. Search online to find classes near you. Compare the prices and the reviews. Then choose a few check out in person.

- Once you arrive at a yoga or Pilates studio you're interested in trying out, talk to the instructor about your goals and what you're looking for in a class. This will help you decide what class is right for you.



4 Attend classes for both to decide which is best for you. If you haven't yet decided for sure whether yoga or Pilates is what you want to do, spend some time at classes for both. Look for classes that offer free trials, or free classes for newcomers. Attend a quality yoga class and a quality Pilates class a few times each and by then you should be able to make a fully informed decision on which will better serve your needs.



Expert Q&A

Question

Which would be better from an athletic perspective, for more muscle strengthening, flexibility and injury prevention?



E Medi
Community Answer

Pilates is about strengthening the core, which sounds more like what you seem to be after.

Helpful 20 Not Helpful 0

Question

Which of these is the best for lower back issues?



Community Answer

Both are good, but Pilates focuses more on core strength which is good for the lower back.

Helpful 62 Not Helpful 8

Question

Which is better for improving posture and elongating/decompressing the spine?



Community Answer

Yoga is better for your posture as it focuses more on holding poses and on flexibility, but both are good.

Helpful 43 Not Helpful 12

Question

I was told Pilates focuses on core strength, which is good for the lower back. Can I trust this even though I feel pain in my lower back for several days after each Pilates class?



Community Answer

You might be feeling pain because you have been using your lower back muscles more frequently than they are used to. Talk to your instructor and see what he/she has to say.

Helpful 10 Not Helpful 0

Question

Which is better for improving breathing difficulties?



Community Answer

Yoga, as breathing is one of its main focuses.

Helpful 26 Not Helpful 6

Question

I have a nerve pain in my arm, which is better for this?



Community Answer

Yoga is recommended for such pains.

Helpful 18 Not Helpful 11

Question

Which is better if I have lumbar osteoporosis?



Community Answer

Pilates on the reformer or with resistance bands will help you build strong bones, as it is a closed-chain exercise.

Helpful 5 Not Helpful 0

Question

I have had recent knee surgery and can no longer kneel, so which would be better for me?



Community Answer

If you recently had knee surgery, please avoid any exercise unless instructed by a professional. Visit a good physiotherapist, who can suggest exercises specifically with your knee in mind.

Helpful 26 Not Helpful 11

Question

Which is better for stress release between yoga and pilates?



Community Answer

Yoga is better for stress relief because it's calmer and more focused on connecting your mind and body.

Helpful 8 Not Helpful 1

[See more answers](#)



Warnings

- Please consult with your doctor before you take yoga and pilates class. Some of the poses may be dangerous for you if you have had surgery or suffer from any illness.

References

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This article was co-authored by **Atthena Breiton, E-RYT 500**. Atthena Breiton is a Yoga Alliance E-RYT 500 and Continuing Education Provider. She is the Founder & Principal Teacher of AtthenaYoga, a boutique yoga and meditation studio in New York City. She has been teaching since 2015, and some of her clients include NFL football player, Jordan Matthews, and Hip Hop Rapper, Lil Yachty. In addition to her studio, Atthena teaches and lectures around the city at major corporations such as Facebook, Ernst & Young, HSBC, U.S. Bank, and WPP. Atthena follows the path of Bhakti Yoga, a path of selfless love, devotion, and service to the Divine. Atthena holds a BS in Economics with concentrations in Finance and Management from the University of Pennsylvania. This article has been viewed 748,647 times.



8 votes - 100%

Co-authors: **26**

Updated: **September 16, 2021**

Views: **748,647**

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