Can Pilates help me safely return to exercise



Pilates is a system of exercises, pioneered by Joseph Pilates in the early 1900's, that places a particular focus on training and control of the deeper system of stabilising muscles of the body. Broadly in the body you have 2 systems of muscles, stabilising muscles and movement muscles. Your stabilising muscles are the deepest system of muscles in the body and are responsible for stiffening the bones of the skeleton together to provide a stable framework for the second group of muscles, the movement muscles or prime movers, to generate force for movement from.

The term 'core muscles' is one that almost everyone is familiar but has perhaps been a little overstated as the only area important in control. Your core muscles are simply the stabilising muscles of the trunk and while certainly important, are part of a whole system of stabilising muscles that are essential for efficient, controlled, pain free movement.

A common pattern seen in the clinic is where people have been less active, and then decide, for all the right reasons to try to get fit and increase their activity levels, but throw themselves into a level of exercise that is too much for their stabilising system. This results in poorly controlled movement and overload to the joints and tissue, ultimately resulting in injury and a visit to the physio.

The benefits of Pilates in injury prevention and enhanced performance is well documented. For those that have some whatever reason become deconditioned, considering undertaking a course of Pilates to improve their core strength and stability before attempting to significantly ramp up their exercise levels helps to ensure a safe return to exercise and activity.

So will I crack a sweat and get my heart rate up? Sadly no. As a good general rule, particularly in the initial stages, the faster you move, the poorer your movement patterns and recruitment of your stabilising muscles will be. The exercises can definitely be heavy and hard to control, but in general tend to be slower, with a focus on correct breathing and good technique.

The movement patterns learned in Pilates allow your brain to apply the same movement patterns to faster more dynamic movement, this all happens too fast to consciously think about. Once you have developed the required strength and endurance in your stabilising system, often higher level general exercise or gym work can be a great way to build on those foundations and really take things to the next level both in terms of strength as well as cardiovascular fitness.

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