



Instructor Brie Adina Neff works with Solomon and Judith Levy at Equilibrium Pilates, Philadelphia.

## Strengthening Seniors

A Pilates exercise program can have great benefits for seniors. BY BRIE ADINA NEFF

**A**s a low-impact exercise with strengthening and flexibility benefits, Pilates is an ideal exercise program for seniors. It includes exercises that target every muscle in the human body, from finger tips (to relieve neuropathy)<sup>1</sup> to eyeballs (helpful for deteriorating vision).<sup>2</sup>

Pilates includes many exercises that specifically benefit common ailments in older people. For example, many elderly clients experience pain in their knees, often due to arthritis or a general wear and tear of the body. With Pilates, they can still get a fabulous workout by focusing on the mid section and abdominal muscles and avoiding the knees entirely. Pilates is beneficial for those suffering from arthritis because it keeps the body in motion to ward off stiffness and pain.

It can also help combat loss of bone density<sup>3</sup> while increasing strength in the surrounding muscles, ligaments and joints.<sup>4</sup> Balance exercises are also wonderful for older clients

who could end up in the hospital with just a simple slip.

### TOOLS & EXERCISES

Pilates uses resistance training machines with adjustable springs to allow for different strength levels. The most commonly used piece of equipment is the Universal Reformer—a bed with a carriage that slides smoothly back and forth. Many seniors use the Reformer to do the Footwork, an exercise that helps strengthen the lower body including the abdominals, pelvis, low back, legs and feet. The Footwork is performed by lying down on the Reformer on one's back with feet resting on the bar. While engaging the abdominal area, the participant slides the carriage open by pushing against the bar with the feet and legs and then bringing it back using resistance and control.

The Footwork can be helpful for individuals who are recovering from hip replacement surgery. Because it is performed lying down,

there is no fear of falling. It's also recommended for rehab clients to gain strength and mobility to begin walking again.

A great tool for balance exercises is the High Chair, which looks like a throne and can help clients build strength in the legs and lower body. The High Chair has a backboard to ensure proper alignment, poles and handles to hold onto for support and a pedal to place the feet on.

A simple exercise performed on the High Chair is called Pumping. The client sits on the chair, wrapping his arms around the poles. With his feet on the pedal, he must pump the pedal up and down while maintaining proper form. As the client gets stronger (or if there is a strength imbalance due to surgery or health problems), he can progress to one leg.

The Hundred is another valuable exercise and is used to strengthen the heart and lungs. The Hundred can be performed with or without equipment and the level of difficulty can be increased or diminished based on the client's ability. Usually, we first introduce this exercise on the mat and have the client lie down on her back. If she can, she must draw her knees up into the chest. Use cushions to help support the neck and shoulders if the client is straining. ▶

The client must extend her arms long by her sides and pump her arms up and down while inhaling for five pumps and then exhaling for five pumps. As the client exhales, she must engage the abdominal muscles and coop the abdominal cavity up and under the rib cage.

Our clients enjoy the challenge of these exercises and they love experiencing the results.

#### NO LIMITATIONS

Many Pilates exercises are performed sitting or lying down and use gravity to help the participant get the most out of each exercise. Because many exercises can be done in a seated position—from strengthening the abdominals to an entire series of arm exercises performed with or without weights—even wheelchair users can participate.

Individuals who have limited strength can also benefit from Pilates. We often use pre-Pilates to get older or disabled people started. For example, in the Castanets exercise, the client sits or stands with a straight back and engages the stomach muscles. Lifting the arms to shoulder height, the client squeezes the thumb to the pinky finger for five to 10 counts, trying not to move the other fingers of the hand while keeping an upright posture. Then the client moves to the next finger, the next finger, and so on.

When all of the fingers have been exercised the whole hand gets a stretch by rippling the fingers three or four times. Eventually, the client must also do this exercise with arms extended to the sides, above the head and even behind the back, which opens the chest.

One of my clients uses the Castanets exercise to treat deteriorating sensation in her fingertips due to arthritis and neuropathy. When standing, it is a great exercise in balance.

Only properly certified Pilates instructors should teach Pilates exercises, and all interested clients should discuss it with their doctor before enlisting in any Pilates program. To find a qualified instructor near you, go to [www.romanaspilates.com](http://www.romanaspilates.com). ■

# Pilates

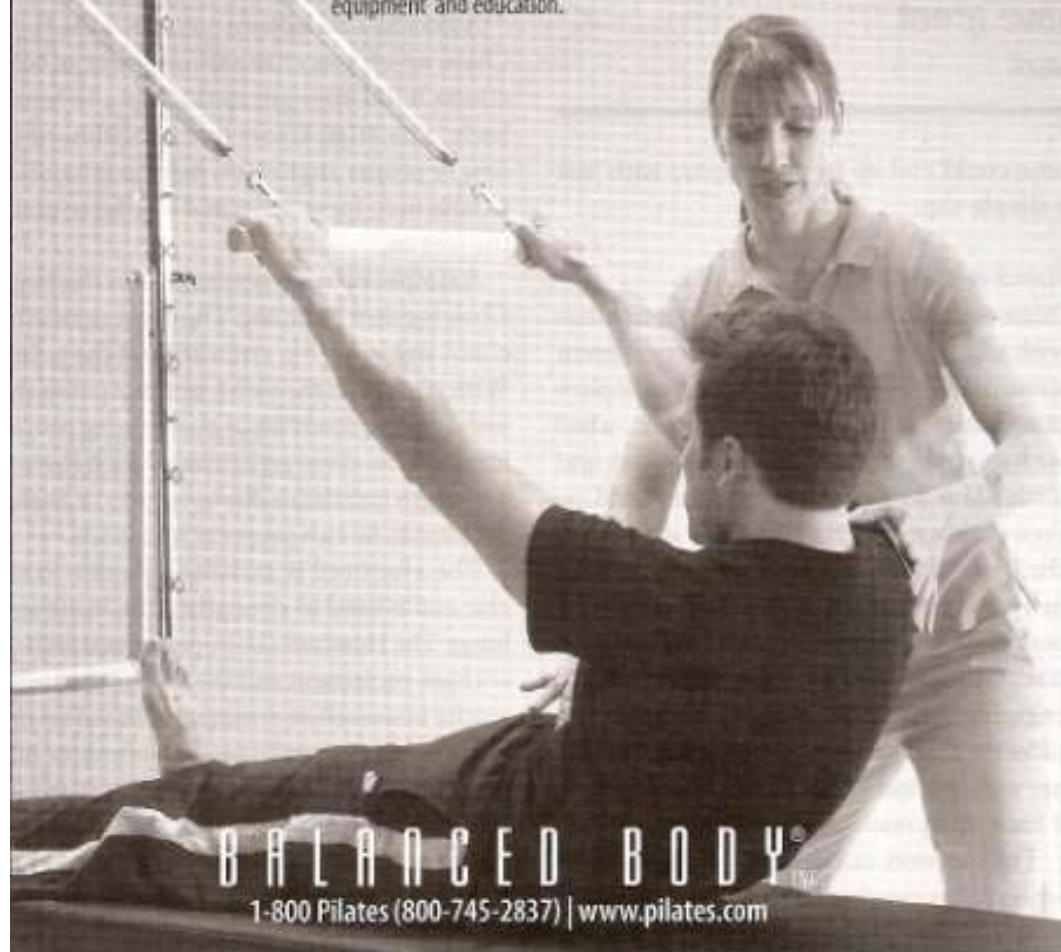
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**Brie Adina Neff** is director and senior certified instructor at Equilibrium Pilates, Philadelphia. For more information, please call (215) 923-3669 or visit [www.equilibrium-pilates.com](http://www.equilibrium-pilates.com).