



It's a bit like yoga and gymnastics, and proponents claim that it can help your posture, your flexibility, and your overall muscular balance. But will it really help you be a better cyclist?

Should cyclists try Pilates?

MAYBE

Joe Beer,
Cycling coach



Exercise trends have come and gone in the hundred and odd years of cycling's history. Some have stuck around, becoming more evolved and refined. Pilates is one of these. Early on it was a mainstay for dancers. Nowadays it's a fitness trend that has classes across the country.

There are really two types of Pilates: clinical Pilates – a sort of mixture of pilates and physiotherapy that aims to treat specific ailments and sports related imbalances; and fitness Pilates, which incorporates a class-type structure to deliver a whole-body exercise routine. We are focusing on fitness Pilates.

In 2005, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) stated that Pilates 'is a beneficial exercise to enhance flexibility and muscular fitness and endurance, particularly for intermediate and advanced practitioners, but may have limited potential to notably increase cardiovascular fitness and reduce body weight.'

Subsequent research has shown it is comparable to active stretching, but for those that improve to the advanced level it may be as exerting as step-type exercise. It seems it is good at activating parts of the abs that normal crunches do not hit.

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However, the claims that Pilates can lengthen muscles, make one leaner, and streamline the body are not supported. Muscles are of a set length: you do not make them longer. More flexible, maybe, but not longer. Similarly the data on calorific use suggests Pilates will not make you leaner. You may feel muscles you never knew you had (I've done a course of Pilates so do know what it feels like) but you won't be leaner. 'Streamlining' or 'toning the body' are vague phrases. Enough of any exercise will make you lose fat, while muscles can either be made larger (anabolism) or left to reduce (atrophy).

On the plus side, Pilates does give people the opportunity to master a new skill, to relax as they focus on a task and improve body awareness. There will be some strengthening of muscles engaged, providing localised endurance: where once the muscle quivered and fatigued it will

be able to do more and maintain a consistent hold on the posture.

The big question is: should Pilates be in your weekly exercise routine? It depends what you're after. Some cyclists have reported back to me that Pilates has helped them, while others got bored or frustrated and just rode their bike more.

If you're stressed, inflexible, and have muscles that feel weak and unable to support your posture on the bike, Pilates may be worth trying. Using a Pilates DVD could help with your post-ride limbering up and cooling down, but don't forget that there's no one to spot if you're doing it wrong, unlike a class.

Don't write off other activities that can help keep your body balanced and your muscles loose either. Other cyclists swear by yoga, sports massage, tai chi, meditation, the Bowen technique or Swiss Ball exercises. One of these, or Pilates, could work for you.

YES

Lindsey Jackson, Pilates instructor



While cycling makes you fit, many cyclists do not consider the postural implications involved in riding a bike. The head position is forward and low, making the lumbar spine round excessively. The hips and pelvis rotate forwards and the back of the neck shortens. Most cyclists have shortened hamstrings.

Pilates (pil-ahh-tees) is a solution. It was developed in the early 1900s by a German who studied all sorts of exercise in a bid to keep himself fit and mobile despite rickets and ill health. Using yoga, circus acts and gymnastics for inspiration, Joseph Pilates realised that amazing strength during movement was achievable if your trunk/torso was both strong and flexible.

Most cyclists know they should be stretching more. Levi Leipheimer, winner of the 2008 Tour of California and runner up in 2007 Tour de France, uses Pilates to improve his performance on a bike. His climbing, time trialling and bike handling are very impressive.

With Pilates, cyclists can benefit hugely from opening out their chests, re-aligning their spines and releasing tight leg muscles that are pulling on the pelvis. Another key benefit is efficient movement. If the core is held still and strong the levers (legs) have more power. If the pelvis is rocking and rolling the energy is dispersed up the spine instead of down through the legs.

Martin Batt, aged 55 and keen cyclist found it really helped him. 'I cycle for sport rather than competition. I was sceptical at first, but after six weeks of regular one hour Pilates sessions once or twice weekly I began to see a noticeable improvement, particularly in my endurance and hill climbing abilities. It's also a supremely relaxing experience in a busy working week!'

Pilates helps prevent poor posture, reducing pressure on joints. The stretching element of Pilates improves recovery by shifting toxins and lactic acid. It improves flexibility and helps build long lean muscles rather than bulk like gym work. Breathing is improved and it makes you think more about how you are moving, making everyday movement safe and supported.

Keen cyclists can all benefit from making sure they straighten up and stretch out regularly to avoid cumulative problems later in life. You don't need to endure a stooped posture or an inability to stride, run or even sit without cautious movement and/or pain.

Why try Pilates and not something else? Because if you stick at it for a few weeks it will be a great antidote to poor posture. Classes are shorter than yoga, and so are easier to fit in to a busy schedule. And yoga doesn't focus on 'core stability' as much. Yoga will stretch you, while Pilates will stretch you *and* more rapidly improve your core strength for your spine. Tai Chi will improve your balance and co-ordination but won't stretch you as much. Swimming is aerobic and useful if you are nursing an injury but will not open out your posture and move all joints through the maximum range of movement.

Lindsey Jackson's DVD 'Pilates for men' costs £19.99, www.enhance-wellbeing.com, tel: 01937 586 685