

Pilates and Sports Yoga

Can Rehabilitative Pilates be all, or part of, my plan to “get fit”?

by

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In my personal and professional experience over many years, I have found that many individuals join a gym, an exercise class, or a Pilates studio, for the sole purpose “to get fit”. Whilst I wholeheartedly support you in your individual goal to become fit, your goal needs to be clarified to scrutinize what exactly you mean by being fit. The term fitness has many different definitions and personal interpretations. For example, a weight lifter I know would tell you that he sees himself as fit. He would say, “If I can lift twice my body weight in kilograms, then I must be fit”. His belief of being a fit person is based solely upon the number of kilograms he can dead lift, squat, and bench press. But I would ask, is your fitness level determined by your ability to lift a certain amount of weight, or is it much more than that, or is it something entirely different from that?

A number of years ago I was attending a week long outdoor activity workshop with a friend of mine who was an avid tennis player and coach. After the first day in which we both participated in a variety of outdoor water sports, he said to me, “Before I came here, I thought I was fit, after all, I play tennis. Today alone has taught me, I am not fit”.

In each of these two examples, these men thought they were fit. And, to an extent – they were. They were both sport specific fit. In other words, they could perform their chosen activity at a certain level for a set duration of time without becoming exhausted or breathless. But in terms of overall fitness, they were definitely lacking.

Fitness, that is, overall fitness, is a physiological state of health and mental wellbeing. To become overall fit, you need to challenge your body in a variety of different ways both anaerobically (without oxygen) and aerobically (with oxygen). The anaerobic challenge is of short length, fast, and of high intensity. It calls on your body to produce energy, in the absence of oxygen, from the glycogen stored in your muscles. If your exercise challenge exceeds approximately two minutes (this number is not cast in stone) you will need oxygen to form the needed energy to continue so you will *automatically* then move into the aerobic mode.

In the aerobic mode your body’s respiratory and circulatory systems are activated. Your heart muscle and your lungs work together to efficiently supply your body’s muscles and organs with the necessary amount of oxygen needed to produce the energy required. This aerobic challenge to your body which is done over time allows your cardiovascular and respiratory systems to become more efficient. That is, your heart becomes able to pump more blood through the valves with each beat and your respiratory muscles are also able to force more air in and out of your body to allow for an increase in the exchange rate of oxygen in the lungs. Through this exercise challenge your body’s skeletal muscles are also improving their ability to use not only the remaining glycogen, but more importantly to increase their take up rate of glucose supplied by the liver, which is then converted into muscular energy needed for your present activity demand. Your liver itself is also improving in its ability to supply the glucose needed to meet this additional energy demand. The mitochondria (the powerhouse cells within your muscle cells) are also working more efficiently at converting the glucose into the much needed muscular energy. At the same time the mitochondria are also increasing in size and number. All of these bodily changes are taking place in direct response to the healthy stresses imposed upon your muscles as you exercise.

In my examples above, the anaerobic and aerobic challenges are clear to see. As the weight-lifter challenges his body to lift the weights, he is doing this anaerobically. Each time he lifts

his muscles are challenged by the stress of the weights (high intensity), and since the lift itself takes only seconds (short and fast), his body only needs a short burst of energy to perform the task and it receives this from converting the stored glycogen within his muscles into muscular energy. Weightlifting, therefore, is an anaerobic activity. There is no aerobic challenge present. Logically then, by just lifting weights you will not reach a state of overall fitness.

The tennis player, on the other hand, is challenging his body both anaerobically and aerobically. His tennis serve, strokes, and sprints up and down the court are all short, fast, and of high intensity. These movements place an anaerobic demand on his body. However, he is also challenging his body aerobically because his exercise challenge doesn't stop with each stroke or sprint he performs, but continues throughout the length of the tennis match. Despite challenging his body through his tennis participation both anaerobically and aerobically, he learned through his participation at the outdoor activity workshop, his fitness level was sport specific and not transferable to these new activities. Therefore, he was not overall fit.

To attain overall fitness, you must challenge your body in a variety of different ways both aerobically and anaerobically. If you are consistent in doing this, then you should see yourself improve in terms of muscular strength, endurance, agility, and flexibility. As you increase your overall fitness level, you will also see your ability to perform your daily tasks, including work and/or leisure (which can be a sport) become easier. You will find yourself not out of breath as often when you exert yourself. You will also find that you recover faster from strenuous activities. And you may also find that because you are not drained of physical energy, you have that needed reserve energy to react positively in an emergency situation.

How does all of this relate to rehabilitative Pilates? Will you "get fit", that is attain a level of overall fitness, through your participation in rehabilitative Pilates? To answer these questions, we need to examine whether rehabilitative Pilates challenges your body anaerobically, aerobically, or both?

The aim of rehabilitative Pilates is to help your body rehabilitate/recover from an injury, illness, operation or other physical damage to your body caused by lifestyle, sport, or work. Rehabilitative Pilates focuses on the development of the powerhouse muscles (core), increasing your bodily muscular strength, and your flexibility. You achieve this through practising correct breathing, staying mentally focused on what you are doing, and using the correct form for each individualized exercise on the specialized calibrated resistance machines.

If you choose to, you could postulate that each Pilates exercise repetition could be an anaerobic challenge because each exercise repetition takes very little time and usually involves a high level of intensity (both mental intensity and resistance intensity). However, I personally believe the purpose of rehabilitative Pilates is to help you recover and improve from where you are. It is not specifically designed to be part of your overall challenge to "get fit".

So, what about an aerobic challenge? Rehabilitative Pilates definitely does not offer an aerobic challenge. Each exercise is not designed to be performed at a fast pace nor for an extended amount of time, as it would have to be, for you to be able to activate and improve your

cardiovascular and respiratory systems.

However, rehabilitative Pilates does offer many worthwhile benefits. Most importantly, it is specifically designed to help you get back to your normal life and to your fitness creative activity (if you previously had one). Over the years, I have seen individuals from across the whole spectrum of physically active people, including professional to amateur sportspeople, occasional exercisers, regular exercisers, and non-exercisers, who have all benefited from rehabilitative Pilates. These individuals have all been able to return to their normal life, and if applicable in their particular case, their chosen fitness activities after completing their needed rehabilitative Pilates sessions.

Rehabilitative Pilates, therefore, acts as the bridge to get you back into, or put you into, a more fitness orientated lifestyle. Through your experiences with rehabilitative Pilates you may find that you can do things that you did not know you were capable of, and that you are able to perform these movements with relative ease. You may also find through your participation in rehabilitative Pilates that you come to really enjoy challenging your body to perform in these different ways and you may like to continue doing so. Therefore, rehabilitative Pilates can help you on your journey to fitness, but rehabilitative Pilates by itself can not help you attain overall fitness. Attainment of overall fitness takes much more, and this was clearly demonstrated by my two examples above. Both men's routines lacked the variety of challenges necessary to reach overall fitness. The weightlifter had no variety and no aerobic challenge in his exercise routine. And the tennis player, although he had both an anaerobic and an aerobic challenge, found that his routine lacked the variety necessary to become overall fit and learned that his fitness level was purely sport specific.

If you came to rehabilitative Pilates with an injury obtained during your participation in your overall fitness regime, then certainly, once you have recovered from your injury, you would most likely want to return to your original activity. As you return to your chosen activity, you should find that you are able to gain back most, if not all, of your anaerobic and aerobic fitness levels which you may have lost during your rehabilitation time.

If you have never engaged with an aerobic challenge before, and you have now decided you would like to, may I caution you about your choice of activity? As you choose your activity, be realistic about your capabilities and your present fitness level. If you came to rehabilitative Pilates recovering from an illness, injury, or surgery, then it is important to keep this in mind as you make your choice. If you fail to be realistic you may find your activity choice very frustrating, or even, physically damaging to your body. On that note, I strongly advise you not to try a triathlon challenge on your first day!

Aiming for overall fitness is a fun and worthwhile challenge, but remember it takes a lot more than participating in one exercise class a week. It takes more than a once a week session at a Pilates studio. And it takes more than a gym membership. It takes a commitment to a variety of physical challenges, and a consistency in performing these challenges. Commitment and consistency are the keys to you being able to "get fit".

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