



# How Breast Cancer Patients Benefit from Pilates Therapy

:: By Kimberly Delaney

Pilates expert Dawn-Marie Ickes, MPT, has seen many times how Pilates can help someone who has breast cancer. But one post-mastectomy client who came to see her recently stands out in her mind.

The patient was unable to lift her right arm over her head at all. "Pain, swelling and decreased range of motion had left her unable to perform basic tasks," recalls Ickes, a

Pilates instructor at [Core Conditioning](#) Physical Therapy, Pilates and Gyrotonic in Studio City, Calif. The woman couldn't wash or brush her hair or even put on a seat belt, let alone drive. But after a month of consistent biweekly workouts with modified Pilates exercises, Ickes says her client regained much of her natural range of motion and reduced the pain and swelling by half.

"She's now able to do her own hair, put on her seatbelt and even drive herself," says Ickes. "She's increasing repetitions and resistance levels in her workouts, and she's seen major improvements in what she can accomplish at home and at work."

While scientists know that exercise helps breast cancer patients recover from treatment, they have not yet settled on which type is best. But [Pilates](#), a form of mind-body exercise typically associated with weight loss and strength building, is rapidly gaining a reputation as a key component of breast cancer therapy and recovery.

## Why is Pilates ideal for breast cancer patients?

Pilates expert [Mari Winsor](#) sees Pilates as perfect for breast cancer patients because it is "one of the safest workouts you can do" and because Pilates can be easily modified to accommodate any injury, imbalance or weak area of the body. Winsor has taught Pilates in her Hollywood studio and in workout DVDs for 20 years, and she recently completed a [Pilates for Pink](#) workout DVD with Gaiam and Shape magazine to help raise money for breast cancer research.

Based on her experience with clients, Winsor says, "The health benefits — better circulation, feeling generally stronger and releasing stress — are extraordinary." She says breast cancer patients at every stage

of treatment are reaping the benefits of Pilates — [patients undergoing chemotherapy who want to regain energy](#), those who have finished treatment and want to rebuild strength and relieve treatment side effects, and even survivors who had surgery decades ago but did not receive proper rehabilitation.

Ickes educates her patients on how to counteract common side effects after treatment. Some of the most problematic side effects from surgery include decreased mobility in the shoulder and decreased stability and strength in the shoulder girdle. Many Pilates exercises designed or adapted specifically for breast cancer patients help tackle these shoulder-area issues.

Ickes says post-surgery breast cancer patients tend to limit their exercise and movement to the point that they set back their recovery. Many also develop guarding habits, such as raising their arm on the affected side to protect against being touched or jostled, that can cause further mobility problems in the shoulder area. Exercise can make a huge difference, says Ickes. “We have a much harder time restoring shoulder mobility in patients who stay guarded in a sling for six to eight weeks,” she notes.

Lymphedema, swelling in the arm caused by fluid that is not properly draining, is also common among breast cancer patients. These side effects can interfere with basic daily activities like getting dressed. Ickes says Pilates' emphasis on breathing techniques helps prevent injury by relaxing the body as a whole, and repeated muscle contractions can help promote lymph node drainage to reduce the swelling caused by lymphedema.

To help patients get back to their everyday routines more quickly, Ickes encourages her patients to do low-intensity Pilates exercises as soon as they get the OK from their doctor, ideally within a week of their surgery.

## **How are Pilates exercises modified for breast cancer patients?**

A Pilates instructor who's experienced at working with breast cancer patients will choose specific exercises and modifications to address the side effects of each client individually. Many of the exercises are done with the client lying on her back to support the neck and back, allowing the patient to build strength around the shoulder girdle in a supported and safe position. Affected limbs may be supported with pillows or cushions, and the instructor may choose lighter resistance tools than usual with certain exercises.

For example, instead of arm circles done standing with a moderate-weight resistance tool, the client may be given a modified version done lying on one side and using a lightweight Pilates toning circle.

The instructor may also use "layering" — introducing only a few new exercises per session, so that any problematic moves can be pinpointed easily. He or she may also recommend doing only 3 to 5 repetitions of an exercise at a time, letting the abilities of the affected side determine the amount of resistance and number of repetitions.

## Pilates should complement, not replace, physical therapy

There's a symbiotic relationship between Pilates and physical therapy, says Ickes. Both focus on retraining the connections between the muscles, joints, nervous system and brain. So patients doing physical therapy and Pilates side by side see tremendous benefits. But a Pilates program can also help build on physical therapy that has been completed.

"I like the fact that when people are finished with therapy," Ickes says, "there is an exercise regimen out there that I can recommend to train them on exercises that are beneficial to their body."

## 3 tips on starting Pilates therapy for a breast cancer patient

Ickes offers these pointers for anyone interested in Pilates therapy as part of breast cancer treatment:

1. Breast cancer patients who want to get started with Pilates should *always* obtain clearance from their doctor before participating in any exercise program, both during and following breast cancer treatment.
2. Find a comprehensively trained Pilates teacher with a minimum of five years teaching experience and coursework in working with Pilates/exercise and breast cancer. It's also a good idea to invest in individual sessions before attempting any sort of home program or group classes.
3. Keep in mind that nothing should be painful *during* an exercise. If you feel pain, stop doing the exercise and inform your instructor immediately so he or she can help you modify the exercise to eliminate pain.

## Pilates is raising awareness and funds for breast cancer research

In addition to being great therapy, Pilates has also become a vehicle to raise awareness and funds for breast cancer research. The [Shape Magazine Pilates for Pink](#) event in New York's Union Square Park and related events at local Pilates studios are giving participants a taste of the Pilates exercise method while raising money for the [Breast Cancer Research Foundation](#) (BCRF). You can support the cause and get a challenging workout to do in your living room, plus a free resistance band, by purchasing Winsor's new [Pilates for Pink DVD](#). Gaiam donates a portion of proceeds to BCRF.

<http://life.gaiam.com/gaiam/p/How-Breast-Cancer-Patients-Benefit-from-Pilates-Therapy.html>