

SHAPE

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The truth about Pilates: will Pilates lengthen my muscles?... skipping weekend workouts ... and more of your questions answered here

Suzanne Schlosberg

Q My Pilates teacher says traditional weight lifting makes your muscles shorter and tighter, whereas Pilates builds strength while lengthening muscle. I am 31 and take Pilates mat classes twice a week. Do I need to add weight training?

A Your instructor is mistaken. "Pilates doesn't lengthen muscles--it conditions and trains them," says Dawn-Marie Ickes, co-owner of Core Conditioning, two Pilates and physical therapy facilities in the Los Angeles area, and a board member of the Pilates Method Alliance, a Miami-based nonprofit organization dedicated to maintaining standards among Pilates instructors. Pilates does an excellent job of improving core strength and postural awareness, which can make you look longer and leaner. "If you stand taller and extend your arms farther, you will have the appearance of longer muscles," Ickes says. Pilates may have gotten its long-and-lean reputation because so many lithe, leggy dancers gravitate toward it.

It is also a myth that strength training makes muscles shorter and tighter. If you perform your weight-training exercises through the full range of motion, you actually can gain flexibility, although not nearly as much as you can from a Pilates program, which focuses on increasing range of motion.

More significantly, weight training helps maintain bone density--an important benefit that you won't get from Pilates, says Katie Santos, co-owner of ABSolute Center, a Pilates and yoga studio in Lafayette, Calif. Bone density naturally begins to decline in your mid-30s, Santos says, "and the best defense against osteoporosis is resistance training." Weight training is also important for maintaining your muscle mass and helping to discourage fat accumulation.

You can complete a total-body weight-training routine in just 15-20 minutes twice a week, which should still leave you time for your Pilates classes.

Q I've been strength training for a year and noticed that I don't get sore anymore after a tough workout. Does this mean I'm not working hard enough to keep improving?

A Not necessarily. "You can continue to make progress even if you're not sore," says Lori Incledon, author of *Strength Training for Women* (Human Kinetics, 2005) and a certified personal trainer in Chandler, Ariz. "In fact, you shouldn't equate soreness with making gains." However, it is possible that you aren't adding enough variety to your program. Mixing up routines is the key to stimulating new muscle growth and preventing brain and muscle boredom, Incledon says. Often, these new demands result in muscle soreness a day or two later. That's fine, as long as you're not sore too often or for more than one or two days.

To keep progressing, Incledon recommends varying your routine every four to six weeks. Try new exercises, increase your weights or add more sets. For example, if you've been doing squats, switch to lunges. If you're doing eight to 12 reps, use heavier weights and do six to eight reps. If you've been doing cardio before your weights, switch the order. "Just don't go overboard and switch everything at once," Incledon cautions. "A little bit of muscle soreness can be beneficial, but overdoing it can cause excessive pain and immobility, thwarting your training program."

Q I prefer to work out on weekdays. Is it OK to skip weekend workouts?

A It's not only OK, it's a great idea, according to Alex Figueroa, group exercise manager for the Sports Club/L.A. in Miami. "Come Monday morning, you'll feel rejuvenated," he says. "Psychologically it's a message that your weekend belongs to you, and physically, it prevents overtraining."

However, skipping formal exercise over the weekend doesn't give you the green light to forgo all your healthful habits, Figueroa says. Spending the weekend on the couch with your hand in a bowl of M & M's is not the kind of break your body needs. "Enjoy the weekend, but keep eating a well-balanced diet and remain active," he advises. Walk around the mall with a friend, go out dancing or play Frisbee at the park. You can even burn a few calories while bowling or playing miniature golf.

Suzanne Schlosberg is the author of *The Ultimate Workout Log* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

Send your questions to Shape, Fitness Q & A, 21100 Erwin St., Woodland Hills, CA 91367; fax: (818) 704-7620; e-mail: FitnessQ&A@Shape.com.

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