

Fitness; Yoga, Pilates or both;

The exercise world's current darlings are both slow, intense and therapeutic. But they achieve their fitness goals in distinctive ways.; [HOME EDITION]

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Yoga and Pilates may be the fitness world's most popular couple. Men and women looking for a less-frenetic workout are flocking to both disciplines as copious classes, studios, books, and DVDs appear. There's even a hybrid called Yogalates that blends the best of both worlds.

Those who have at least a vague familiarity with each know that yoga is a practice dating back thousands of years that has a strong spiritual component and a holistic approach, whereas Pilates is a strength and conditioning system done with mat work and apparatus.

And although many consider taking the plunge into one or the other, they often find that choosing between the two can be confusing - which better suits one's fitness needs, body and lifestyle? Both are considered mind-body exercises, meaning that one should be mentally engaged while doing the physical work. Both employ breathing techniques. Both incorporate resistance for toning muscles. Both are used therapeutically. Both are slow, intense routines that can be done through classes or one-on-one training. And both can produce lean, toned bodies.

Yet there are significant differences between the two. Traditional hatha yoga features a series of static poses along with breathing techniques and meditation emphasizing an inward focus. Although hundreds of forms of yoga exist, from restorative to power, the essence of the practices is the same. A yogic lifestyle also emphasizes good nutrition and a holistic approach to wellness. With continual practice should come increased flexibility, overall muscle toning, improved balance, and better ability to handle stress.

Pilates is a series of regimented exercises that focus on using the core muscles of the trunk. Its roots date to the early 20th century, when Joseph Pilates developed a system (adapting some yoga techniques) to help rehabilitate hospital patients during World War I. Years later, dancers adopted it as physical therapy.

Regimented exercises done with controlled breathing can be performed on apparatus or a mat; those done on apparatus use adjustable resistance to strengthen the muscles and employ precise movements to target certain areas of the body. Mat workouts (sometimes done as a class) use the body's own resistance and can incorporate equipment such as stability balls.

The desired results are stronger core muscles, better posture and stability, overall toning, and increased flexibility. And although healthy living is often emphasized in Pilates, "you could be drinking a Pepsi while you're doing it," says Ralph La Forge, an exercise physiologist and spokesman for the American College of Sports Medicine. "In terms of lifestyle management, it's not as stringent."

La Forge separates the two this way: "If I were an athlete and I wanted better function, I'd go with Pilates," he says. "If someone has physical performance goals, those have to do with good posture and strong abdominal muscles. Pilates is more about musculoskeletal health." Yoga, however, would be his choice "if someone needed to change their lifestyle, if there are overall health and lifestyle goals - someone who has had their first heart attack or has high blood pressure or diabetes."

How yoga and Pilates are used therapeutically supports La Forge's beliefs. Yoga therapy is incorporated in rehab programs for diseases and chronic conditions to help manage symptoms and improve quality of life. Pilates in a physical-therapy setting helps people bounce back from injuries.

But the true differences between yoga and Pilates may come down to the distinct approaches each takes to discipline. Yoga classes often use music and sometimes integrate chanting or affirmations, which address the meditative side. Pilates usually skips the music and the talk, taking a more pragmatic slant.

When it comes to structure, "Pilates is done in sets and reps, and yoga is not," says Leigh Crews, a Georgia-based yoga instructor and former Reebok program developer in yoga and Pilates. "Pilates is a very ordered and structured way to exercise. So people need to figure out if they want an instructor counting reps and leading them through a very organized series of exercises, or something a little more free-form. Yoga does have a built-in structure, but it isn't built so much around numbers."

Yoga, she adds, "is a journey of self and experimentation. You can experiment with holding your hip here or there, and experiment with what it feels like to get your hips level in warrior pose." Pilates, with its more regimented form, is less experimental and more goal-oriented: "You're striving to get in alignment."

More information on yoga and Pilates can be found at www.yogajournal.com and www.pilatesinsight.com.