

# The Power of Pilates

## Asthma Patients See Improvements, But Research Is Lacking

By Mike Bederka

**T**hree years ago, a severe asthma attack landed Pam Olson, RN, in the emergency room. "I couldn't breathe," remembers the 54-year-old, who had 30 percent lung capacity at the time.

Her condition improved only minimally when she left the hospital. She barely moved out of a chair for a month. After that, the pediatric nurse couldn't walk and talk at the same time.

A chance encounter in church changed Olson's life. She met a Pilates instructor and began taking regular lessons.

Olson learned how to breathe properly, and she strengthened her abdominal and chest wall muscles. Today, she rarely wheezes and hasn't had an asthma attack since July. When she last checked in September, her lung capacity had increased to 78 percent, and she thinks it's better now.

She even has the pipes to sing in her church choir.

Olson, of Westminster, Colo., doesn't mince words when asked where she would be without Pilates—a method of exercise and physical movement designed to stretch, strengthen and balance the body.

"It's very possible I would be on disability," she said, adding after a pause, "actually, I'm pretty sure I would be dead."

### A Lung Workout

Brie Adina Neff, owner of Equilibrium Pilates, witnesses similar success stories all the time in her Philadelphia studio.

She instructs her clients with asthma to

stand as straight as they can and inhale deeply. Then she has them exhale through a straw into the side of a small metal pinwheel while they slowly roll their head downward toward their toes.

Neff recalled one person who could exhale for only 4 seconds when she started Pilates more than a year ago; now she's up to almost 10 seconds.

The certified Pilates instructor follows founder Joseph Pilates' belief that the lungs must be worked like all the other muscles in the body.

"Every exercise we do in Pilates has a coordinated breath," she said. "It's not a little, skinny breath. It's a great big deep breath."

One exercise, "the 100," particularly emphasizes breath control explained Gyasi Grant, a New York-based certified Pilates instructor and asthmatic. "When doing this exercise, you exhale forcefully and simultaneously pull in and tighten the abdominals. This works to recruit the diaphragm and strengthen the muscles that aid lung contraction."

### More Evidence Needed

While intrigued, Leonard Bielory, MD, approaches Pilates' impact on asthma with skepticism and urges people to make the distinction between anecdotes and evidence.

"That's very, very important. Anecdotally, everything works," said Bielory, director of the Asthma and Allergy Research Center at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ), Newark.

Little or no clinical studies exist on Pilates and asthma, but that could change in the future, believes Adam Perlman, MD, MPH, FACP, executive director of the Institute for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at UMDNJ.

"As yoga became more popular, we saw a lot more yoga research," he said. "I would suspect that as Pilates' popularity continues to grow, you would see the same sort of thing."

In the meantime, Perlman doesn't discourage asthma patients from trying Pilates. The exercise routine, he said, can help breathing-impaired individuals focus on their body's core and on strengthening musculature.

Pilates also works in the big-picture sense, Perlman noted. "The more you can maximize your overall fitness and sense of wellness, the more your quality of life is going to improve," he said. ■

Mike Bederka, managing editor, can be reached at [mbederka@merion.com](mailto:mbederka@merion.com).

### What Is Pilates?

Joseph Pilates, an asthmatic, created Pilates more than 80 years ago. Pilates focuses on postural symmetry, breath control, abdominal strength, spine, pelvis and shoulder stabilization, muscular flexibility, joint mobility and strengthening through the complete range of motion of all joints, explains the Pilates Method Alliance. Instead of isolating muscle groups, the whole body is trained, integrating the upper and lower extremities with the trunk.

