

Yoga vs. Pilates

by Amy O'Donnell

Are you still thinking about your fitness resolution that you made on Jan. 1? Just because it's getting into autumn doesn't mean you can't get started, right? It's not Dec. 31 yet, so get moving—you want to look good in those party clothes when the holidays come around, now don't you?

Everybody's doing either Yoga or Pilates, but what's the difference? Glad you asked—Yoga, a series of low-impact stretching and posing combined with breathing and meditation, originated in India over 5,000 years ago, and has been taught to people from all over the world. It's now one of the most popular forms of exercise, with versions made for kids to senior citizens. In fact, a new Yoga studio has just opened in the HEB shopping center at the corner of Bay Area Boulevard and El Camino Real. There are many varieties of Yoga, although most taught and used in the West is called *Hatha Yoga*, working with postures, breathing techniques, conscious relaxation and meditation. Another popular form, *Ashtanga Yoga*, is a bit more aerobic, consisting of a series of more intense poses combined with a specific breathing technique. It is sometimes called *Power Yoga*, an American version of *Ashtanga* introduced by master instructor Beryl Bender Birch. Whichever form you attempt—and there are many variations—Yoga is complete a body-and-mind exercise.

Pilates is named for its creator, Joseph H. Pilates, a nurse, who created this system after his sickly childhood to defend the body against illnesses. He was always interested in Eastern and Western approaches to health, fitness and wellness, and combined the two. Pilates became an avid athlete despite his early illnesses. During WWI he tested his methodology to assist inactive patients using whatever equipment he had available, like beds and chairs. Modern Pilates equipment is based on those early makeshift prototypes. He was asked to train the elite armed forces of the British military; later, performers and athletes consulted him for training and rehabilitation. His wife, Clara Pilates, also a nurse, moved with him to New York from Germany, and their first studio opened in 1926. Overlap exists between the two, but Yoga and Pilates are two distinct forms of exercise.

I started doing Yoga again earlier this year, but recently switched to Pilates because of what's called "core strength." In other words, the trunk, or "Powerhouse," is the focus, and the limbs move from it, rather than just exercising the arms or legs and moving the trunk along with it. This shift in focus works muscles in the entire body, rather than just parts of it in traditional exercises like push-ups, sit-ups or squats. I prefer the "whole body" approach rather than just arm or legwork, or heavy aerobic routines that take too much time and tend to be tiring.

Fitness clubs nationwide have both Yoga and Pilates in their repertoire, even the YMCA. If those classes do not fit your schedule, or if you'd rather exercise at home, and videos work perfectly once you watch them and work with them a few times—don't give up after the first time. I have four videos (two Yoga, two Pilates) that I use regularly. I can also recommend this one that I use occasionally:

Cameron Shayne's *Budokon Beginning Practice*. This video starts with a pose guide, then 20 minutes of Yoga followed by 15 minutes of martial arts-style kicking and punching, finishing with a short Qigong meditation and relaxation segment. (You will need a Yoga mat and a pair of bricks). This is not for the faint of heart or the really out-of-shape couch potato; you'll probably need to have some degree of conditioning before attempting this workout; some muscle soreness is a given unless you are in top form. There is a pose guide and a slightly shorter workout without as much instruction, and three instructors demonstrate the routines and include all degrees of condition. Make sure you have a bit of room to move for this one, or you will be putting your foot through sheetrock or punching out the screen of your television. While perfectly suitable for both men and women in relatively good shape, this DVD may also interest men who want to exercise at home but don't want to feel like they should be wearing leg warmers.

You can also try out any number of exercise videos by borrowing them from the Harris County Public Library System. You can use them for free for a week—or more, if no one wants them when you renew. Just put a request in at any Country library, VHS or DVD. (The Houston Public Library has fewer titles.) Go to the Library's website (<http://www.hcpl.lib.tx.us/branchinfo/fm/fminfo.htm>) and do a catalog search. HCL currently has 82 entries for Pilates and 292 entries for Yoga, so just take your pick and they'll be waiting for you in a few days to a few weeks, depending on how many holds are on it. Some are easy, some are difficult, some take a long time; some are made for the time-crunched. Read the description before you request them, and watch them before you attempt them. Books on the subjects are also included in that listing. If you are anticipating some ribbing from your partner, get him or her to exercise with you. There are a number of "Yoga For Two" videos available; Gaiam.com has a very good one with Rodney Yee. Pilates and Yoga videos are also readily available to purchase at many area retail outlets as well as from online retailers.