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Tips to Remember

(exercises follow)

by Nicole Dorsey

Pilates-based mat moves are the ultimate at-home method for strengthening and lengthening your body without machines, says Brooke Siler, certified Pilates instructor and author of *The Pilates Body* (Broadway Books, 2000).

“The stomach, hips, lower back and buttocks are the powerhouse of your body and [are] instrumental in maintaining good posture and alignment,” she says. “You will be using and toning these big muscles during every step of the mat exercises.”

As you move through these sometimes challenging callisthenics, keep in mind these basic tenets of the Pilates philosophy:

- Breathe deeply and naturally to fuel and replenish your body. Don’t hold your breath at any point, especially during the more taxing abdominal exercises.
- Always do the exercises with precision, concentration and control. Avoid quick, jerky movements and keep all exercises fluid and graceful, as a dancer would.
- Listen to your muscles, especially when you initially start exercising. Depending on your present fitness level, some exercises may be too demanding to complete fully the first few times through. “Don’t give up if you can’t get the moves right away,” says Siler. “Regular Pilates practice takes patience and persistence.”
- Also, remember to breathe deeply and stop exercising immediately if something causes acute pain. If you have lower-back problems, see your physician before beginning this regimen.

The Exercises

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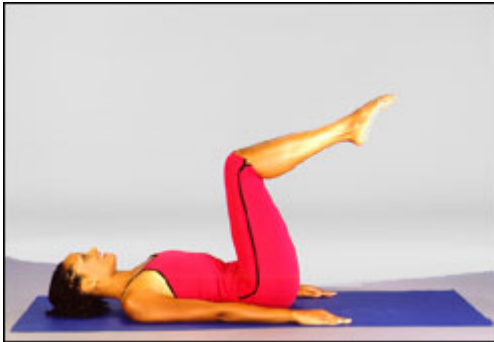
You’ll start the mat exercises with simple, preparatory moves and progress to more difficult manoeuvres; so when in doubt, do the exercises in order. Practice the easier ones until you feel confident in your body’s ability to take the next step, and only then move onto the following exercise.

Brooke Siler, certified instructor and author of *The Pilates Body*, suggests you read through all the instructions first and visualize each movement before you begin the exercise. “Always find your powerhouse muscles -- abs, butt, lower back and hips -- and use them to strengthen and support you,” she recommends. To maximize your form, look for Brooke’s expert tips, excerpted from *The Pilates Body*, at the beginning of each exercise.

The Hundred

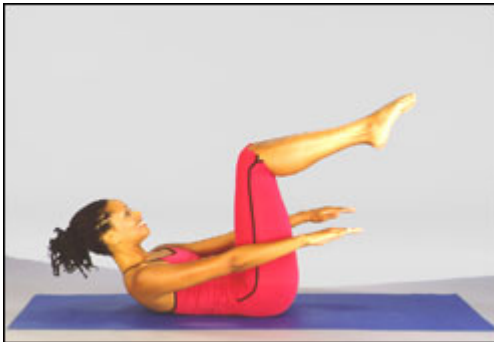
This is a warm-up exercise which begins to circulate oxygen through your blood and prepares your body for exercise. Make sure you breathe with every pumping repetition.

1



Lie back with knees bent slightly over chest (at 90-degree angles with the floor) and bring arms alongside your body, palms down. Maintain a flat back and let your belly sink into your spine.

2



Lift head and neck off the mat and begin pumping your arms straight up and down in tandem as if you were slapping water. Pump your arms and breathe simultaneously for 20-30 breaths, and eventually work your way up to 100 repetitions with your head raised.

Rolling Like a Ball

Inhale on the roll-back, exhale on the roll-up, and *do not* use your shoulders to propel your body.

1



Sit tall with knees into chest and place a hand underneath each thigh, bringing knees close to your chest. Tuck chin into chest, keep elbows wide and lift feet slightly off the floor using your midsection muscles to balance.

2



From your tailbone, roll backwards to your shoulder blades (not your neck); then, forcefully but slowly, use those powerhouse muscles to bring you back to the starting position. Rock back and forth with control six times.

Single Leg Stretch

If your neck gets tired during this or any other exercise, rest it on the mat for a few seconds. And always focus your eyes between your legs -- don't strain your neck by looking up.

1



Lie back with knees into chest, neck and chin up, and hold onto left shin with both hands. Extend your right leg up perpendicular to floor and exhale deeply, watching your abdominals contract. Hold here for a few breaths.

2



On the next inhale, switch leg positions with control and keep chin lifted. Hold opposite (right) shin for a few breaths. Slowly alternate sides for three repetitions, and press your lower back even further into the mat as you move smoothly through the motions.

Single Leg Circles

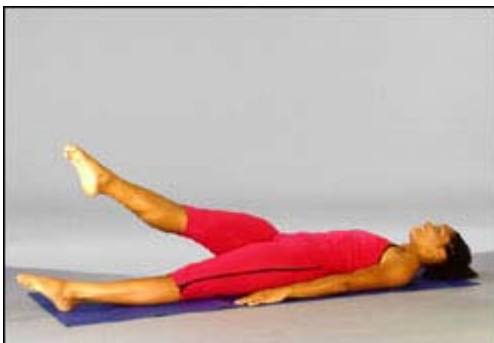
As you grow stronger, you'll gradually make bigger circles. Maintain control through your hips and legs during each part of the circle.

1



Lie back with head down to the mat and arms at your sides, palms down. Press your palms to the floor to boost stability. Extend right leg straight up to ceiling and keep opposite (left leg) cemented down to the floor. Press your spine to the mat and make sure your lower back maintains contact at all times.

2



Slowly make giant clockwise circles with your right heel without letting your lower back arch up at all. Envision leading each circle from the inside of your knee instead of your outer thigh. Perform 3-5 powerful, slow circles with each leg. Finish with your leg pointing across your opposite thigh.

Straight Leg Stretch

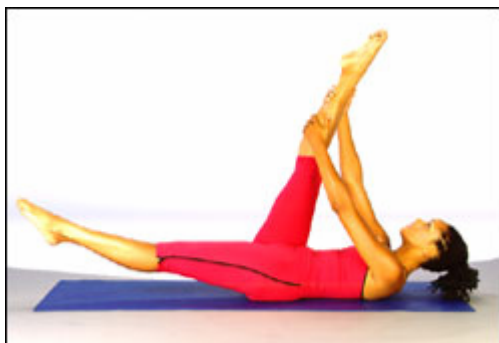
You're training all those powerhouse muscles in this challenging stretch, so use a sense of rhythm to control your momentum as you switch sides -- imagine the rhythm of windshield wipers beating to help you along.

1



To start, lie back and pull both knees into chest to stretch the spine. Then, extend left leg straight up to ceiling and curl torso up until you can reach your ankle (or shin) with both hands. Keep your opposite leg (right) about 8-10 inches off the mat and press your lower back to the mat. Inhale deeply and pull straight right leg closer to your head.

2



On a deep exhale, switch straight legs by scissoring them until you can grab your right ankle with both hands. Keep eyes focused on your belly and don't rely on your chest or shoulders to help. Perform 5-10 repetitions with each leg without rocking or straining.

Crisscross

There are so many ways to cheat during this exercise, so mentally move through this checklist to improve your technique:

- Feel your waistline twist each time and never rush through the exercise.
- Keep elbows extended wide and do not allow them to touch down.
- Do not let extended leg drop too low toward the mat or you may jeopardize your back.
- Use only your powerhouse muscles to initiate the movements; avoid using neck, shoulders or lower back.

1



Lie back with hands behind your head for support and knees bent into chest. Extend right leg straight out, and twist upper body until right elbow nears left knee. Inhale as you twist up and lift torso up until upper back and shoulders are off the mat.

2

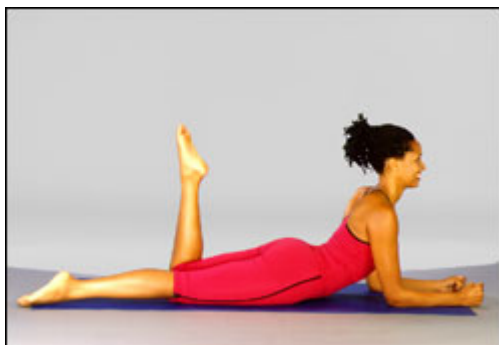


On a deep exhale, switch sides until left elbow nears right knee. Imagine your back and butt anchored to the mat so your body does not rock during the transition. Using precision and slow motion, alternate 5-10 times on each side of your body.

Single Leg Kicks

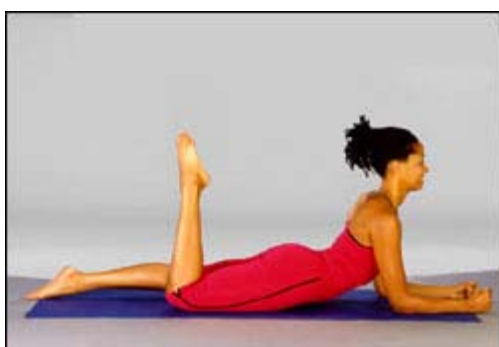
The key to this lower body exercise is to remain lifted through your shoulders and remain perfectly still through your upper body as you kick. Try to lengthen through the crown of your head to maintain a long neck.

1



Lie on your stomach and press pubic bone firmly to the mat. Come up to your elbows and stack them directly beneath shoulders. Ball your hands into fists and press them into the mat in front of you. Squeeze your butt and thigh muscles to stabilize yourself. Kick left heel into left buttock with a double beat (or kick). Keep right leg super-straight and in contact with the mat while the left leg kicks.

2



Alternate sides for five repetitions, and when you're done, sit back on your heels to stretch your spine.

The Saw

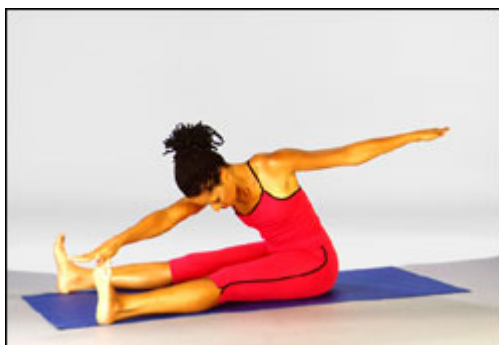
Cement your hips and butt to the mat and allow all movement to initiate from the waistline. If you're really inflexible, allow one or both knees to bend slightly through the twisting motion.

1



Sit up tall with legs extended in front of you; open legs wider than your hips; flex your feet. Stretch arms out to your sides, parallel to chest.

2



Twist torso to the left until right fingers touch (or approach) your left toes. Exhale deeply, stretching through your chest as you edge closer to your left toes. Inhale and prepare to switch sides. Pull your navel firmly in toward your spine to protect your back, and twist first to the right side through your waistline. Alternate four very controlled repetitions as you stretch head and neck to opposite sides; your head should be the last part to come up.

Modified Swan Dive

Do not drop your head back or slump through the shoulder blades. To properly stretch your back, neck and shoulders, you must draw your navel up to your spine and keep your chest lifted.

1



Lie on your stomach and bend both arms so your palms are flat on the mat underneath your shoulders. Squeeze inner thighs together and press the tops of your feet to the mat. Inhale and begin to straighten your arms, pressing your torso up to the ceiling.

2



Press arms up to full extension and keep belly tight to inhale/exhale deeply for a few breaths. Contract your butt muscles to support your spine and gradually lower back to start position; repeat three times.