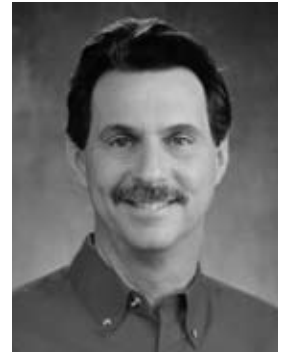


## Creating Programs That Deliver New Patrons

### Pilates for post-pregnancy benefits brand-new moms

By Ken Endelman



Ken Endelman

To stay vital, recreation and community centers, like any business, always must be on the lookout for fresh ways to serve new groups and specialized populations. Targeting and tailoring programming to an underserved population not only extends a facility's reach into the community but can bolster its bottom line as well.

The birth of a new-found market is always a good thing, and a prime example is new moms.

The time when women were told not to exercise before and after having a baby is long gone. Many of today's expectant mothers are extremely active. They continue to work, manage families and exercise late into their pregnancies and soon after they've given birth. And they've never been healthier.

Forward-thinking recreation and community centers have capitalized on this trend by adding post-natal exercise classes. One exercise program in particular is gaining momentum. Pilates is the fastest growing fitness activity in the U.S. and Canada. The Sporting Goods Manufacturer's Association reports that Pilates participation in North America has grown from 2.1 million people in 2001 to 9.4 million in 2003—an increase of 445 percent.

#### Pilates and the post-natal body

How does Pilates benefit post-natal women? While the most visible aspect of post-pregnancy is weight gain, a

new mom's body has undergone a tremendous – and invisible – internal transformation. The abdomen, pelvic floor, and inner thigh muscles have all been stretched and desensitized.

The low-impact movement, stretching and focused breathing of Pilates helps regain muscle balance. It shortens muscles that have stretched during pregnancy (the abdomen), and lengthens muscles that have shortened (the lower back). Pilates can also help strengthen the pelvic floor, restore its sensation, and improve a new mother's mental health.

"After pregnancy your body really feels like it is not your own because it is serving the needs of the baby," says Stacy Sims, owner of Pendleton Pilates in Cincinnati. "Pilates helps women

reclaim their bodies as well as a sense of self."

The Parks and Recreation Department in Boulder, Colo., offers a post-natal Pilates class as part of their Pilates programming.

"We understand what our community wants, and we felt it was important to create a post-partum program," says Louann Harlow, a recreational coordinator for the city. "Pilates was a perfect fit."

Kerry Lewis Walker has taught the mat and prop-based postnatal Pilates class at the East Boulder Community Center for nearly three years. Her classes meet weekly and include up to 10 women per session—along with their babies. Walker, who also has her own Pilates studio in Boulder, says the



PHOTO COURTESY OF POWERHOUSE PILATES

program has been successful since its onset.

“These Moms are hungry for the social interaction with each other, and to get back control of their bodies,” she says.

She points out that many mothers are limited in finding postnatal exercise options because of child-care and economic limitations. However, because her center offers affordable group prices and allows babies to be alongside mothers during the class, both issues are eliminated.

### **Tips for a successful postnatal Pilates class**

Offering a postnatal Pilates program tells your community that your center is at the forefront of women’s wellness. It also can potentially turn a profit. Here are tips for creating classes that are fun and effective for new moms, as well as for building your center’s bottom line.

#### *1. SAFETY FIRST*

It is important that a new mom get her doctor’s approval before she and her baby attend the class. Generally, mothers can start exercising six to eight weeks after birth and sometimes as early as four weeks. Before starting, your instructors should interview each participant about her birthing and post-birthing experiences. This will help the instructor modify the exercises to meet the needs of each mom.

#### *2. HIRE QUALIFIED INSTRUCTORS*

It’s very important that your Pilates instructors understand the needs of the postnatal body and can modify Pilates exercises to be safe and effective. An undereducated teacher runs the risk of causing injury to new mothers. If you have certified Pilates instruc-

tors on staff who have not taught a postnatal class, have them consult with a local physical therapist or get additional training from a respected Pilates educational organization.

Don’t have a certified instructor? Check out the local Pilates studios and see if you can hire one to teach the class, as Harlow did.

If you can’t find an instructor in your area, consider investing in getting a current staff member certified. This requires an initial financial investment, but a certified teacher can be valuable asset to your center. A certified teacher can offer general Pilates classes as well as specialty classes for golfers, dancers, older adults and other segments of the community.

#### *3. CREATE A PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE*

Like yoga, Pilates is a mind-body exercise that requires concentration and focus. Your setting should enhance the experience. Create a quiet, relaxing and aesthetically pleasing environment. Not every center has an ideal setting, but enhancements can be relatively simple. If you have overhead fluorescent lights, turn some off and invest in a few floor lamps. Play music that reflects the desired atmosphere. If possible, keep the class in a quiet area, away from the noise of the gym or other classes.

#### *4. PROMOTE YOUR CLASS*

Make sure the class is visible to others at your center and that everybody on your staff—from the front desk to other instructors—can answer basic questions about the program.

Flyers are an inexpensive way to promote the class to your community. Distribute them at local doctors’ offices, mothering centers, and businesses that sell baby or nursing supplies. While you’re making these rounds, do a little PR. Talk to the doctors and

business owners about your class and how it benefits new moms.

Women’s wellness: A programming trend on the rise

The upswing in Pilates and postnatal classes reflect an overall increase in women’s wellness programming. With health insurance rates climbing and the public perception that medical care is declining, more women are taking their well-being into their own hands.

“Women don’t just walk into my office and do what I say anymore,” says Chrissy Ruby, a physical therapist and co-founder of Powerhouse Pilates in Pittsburgh. “They question things. ‘Why should I do this? Why do I need to move this way?’ It’s a whole new generation of thought based on people accepting responsibility for their health. And it’s a big boon for Pilates.”

With some effort in planning and marketing, it can be a boon for your center, too.

*Ken Endelman is the founder and CEO of Balanced Body Inc. For more information, visit [www.pilates.com](http://www.pilates.com).*