



Nora St. John

Nora St. John began her training in Pilates with 10 years at St. Francis Memorial Hospital's Dancemedicine division, where she worked primarily with clients with sports related orthopedic injuries. She has continued her training with Pilates master teachers Eve Gentry, Michele Larsson, Carola Trier, Alan Herdman and Romana Kryzanowska, and was a professional modern dancer for 10 years before she began teaching Pilates. Nora co-founded Body Mind Spirit, the largest educational conference for Pilates, Gyrotonic and Nia instructors in the country, and is Program Director of Pilates on Tour, which offers Innovative Education for Pilates Professionals in cities across the country.

Pilates Programming for Active Seniors

By Nora St. John

Pilates is an excellent exercise method for active seniors. Offering Mat and Reformer classes and private sessions targeted to this market can enhance your bottom line by bringing a loyal and financially stable clientele into your health club or studio. Many of the active seniors I work with say they feel better than they have in years, now that they are doing Pilates. Pilates allows them to continue to golf, garden, hike and play with their grandchildren without worrying about overdoing it.

Pilates contains such a wide variety of exercises that, with a good foundation in the basics and a bit of creativity, you can address the needs of any client at any age. I have worked with many clients in their 70s, 80s and 90s, and have rarely found a client that did not benefit from studying Pilates. Over my 16-year teaching career I've also learned that in order to be successful with this group, there are a few things you need to know.

Intake and health history

It's important to gather a basic health history on all of your clients so you know what to be aware of. This becomes even more important with seniors. If something appears on the intake form that concerns you, have your client ask their physician for a medical clearance before starting to work with you.

Medical issues that warrant special attention include:

Osteoporosis

50% of women over 55 have osteoporosis and many of them don't know it. Osteoporosis is a condition that has no symptoms until a bone fractures. Many Pilates exercises, especially those involving spinal flexion, are contraindicated for this condition. If you're teaching mat classes to women over 55 you may want to learn more about osteoporosis, and modify your classes accordingly. Two good resources are the Osteoporosis Exercise Book by Sherri Betz, PT, and Osteoporosis Exercise Protocols by PhysicalMind Institute.

Heart disease, diabetes and other chronic health problems

Exercise is very important for preventing and controlling heart disease, diabetes and other chronic illnesses. Make sure clients with these issues have discussed any exercise precautions with their doctor and shared them with you.

Orthopedic issues

Hip replacement, knee replacement and arthritis are issues you need to be familiar with when working with active seniors. It's not always possible for clients with hip and knee replacements to get down onto the floor easily. For Reformer classes, you may need "feet" on your Allegros, or a wooden Reformer of clinical height. Developing a Pilates-based program that can be done while sitting is helpful in the short term for postsurgical clients, and as a long-term solution for clients with movement limitations.

Vision problems

Age-related vision changes include glaucoma and cataracts, along with losing visual acuity. For clients with glaucoma, inverted positions may increase pressure in the eye. For clients with fading eyesight, make sure you write notes and appointment cards in clear large type, and make hand-outs and informational signs clear and readable.

Hearing changes

Loss of hearing is a common condition in the senior population. Be sure to adjust your voice or use a microphone for class situations. If a client is having a difficult time understanding you or doesn't seem to respond to corrections in a class setting, take them aside and ask them if they're hard of hearing. You may need to encourage them to wear their hearing aid if you are having a difficult time communicating.

Memory changes

Older clients may require more repetitions of an exercise before they can remember and repeat it, and may do better with classes and routines that change gradually over time rather than being completely new every session. I recommend having a standard beginning to each class that lasts 15 to 30 minutes and addresses all of the key elements – increasing circulation, waking up the core, addressing key flexibility issues and strengthening and stretching most parts of the body before moving into new material. This allows your class to really learn the material and to begin to improve their execution of the exercises. When new material is added, explain it carefully and give the class time to digest and practice it for several classes before changing it. This process allows the body to take in the change and start to make it a habit.

CPR training

As hard as it is to say, older clients are at greater risk for heart attacks, strokes and falls. If you work with this population it is more important than ever to make sure your instructors and staff are briefed on appropriate emergency procedures including CPR, external defibrillators if they are used at your facility, who to call – 911 or another number - and the location of the nearest hospital.

Program focus

Programs for active seniors should focus on increasing overall strength, cardiovascular health, flexibility and balance. For strengthening, focus on the quadriceps, hamstrings, back muscles, core and upper body. Work with your client to see what their problems are and adjust the program accordingly. If you aren't sure what to focus on, ask them what they most like to do and design a program for it. One of my older clients is an avid gardener and she was finding it more and

more difficult to get up and down from the ground, lift heavy pots and bags and dig holes for new plants. Together we worked on leg, back, core and upper body strength and now she is able to work in her yard for longer periods without strain.

Pilates isn't generally considered a tremendous cardiovascular workout, so encourage your clients to supplement with a walking or aerobic program. If you're in a studio, consider adding a treadmill or elliptical trainer to your facility. If you're teaching in a health club, encourage your clients to use the aerobic equipment before or after class in order to make it part of their fitness routine.

One of the most common complaints I hear from my older clients is an increase in stiffness, especially in the morning. All of my clients (older or otherwise) receive a flexibility evaluation and are given a daily program for strength and flexibility to do early in the day to keep the stiffness from lingering.

Balance and coordination are included in every program to prevent falls and decrease the risk of fractures. This can include standing exercises on one or both legs, standing on unstable surfaces such as wobble boards and balance cushions, and maintaining overall strength in the legs and core. Good habits of core engagement and balance developed in a Pilates class will allow your clients to react better to unexpected situations.

Marketing

Several strategies can be used to target this population. One is to offer classes specifically for this population in health clubs, senior centers or in active senior communities. Classes often need to be inexpensive in order to attract a population that may live on a fixed income. Rather than offering a drop-in class, I suggest offering 4, 6 or 8-week sessions in order to be able to get to know your audience. All group classes can contain a wide variety of clients with a variety of health issues, but this group can make it especially challenging to teach a safe and effective class if you don't know anything about who's in it.

Another approach is to offer smaller niche classes for certain activities or conditions such as golf, walking, gardening, osteoporosis or arthritis, or to develop a Pilates chair class for clients with mobility limitations.

Pilates is a great lifelong fitness program. My 82-year-old mother has been taking two to three classes a week for 10 years, and she says it makes her feel so good she'll never quit. Many of my other older clients feel the same way.