

Q. I'm in a Reformer class, and the exercises are geared more toward more beginner students. Is it okay to do my own thing?

A. Since you're attending a group class, **doing your own thing** could distract from the instructor's ability to offer a safe and effective multi-level class for you and the other attendees.

Instead of making your own adjustments, **consider taking a more mindful approach** to your participation. Ask yourself: *What can I do to enhance my movement?* Possibly, your **alignment could be altered**—small adjustments to your posture can have a big impact on the intensity of each movement. Or you could stay with the same movement and **lengthen a lever** (extend your arms or legs away from your trunk) to deepen the workout without being disruptive.

Engaging more of your muscles in each move—i.e., whole-body movement—can also increase intensity and strength gains. For instance: Try **pressing your arms into the carriage** to help support and stabilize your trunk, or **pull up on your quadriceps and hamstrings and tighten your glutes** to gain lumbo-pelvic stability for your lower body. These simple strategies can go a long way to making your workouts more successful and challenging without disrupting the instructor or the rest of the class. —Portia Page

» Portia Page has been in the fitness industry for more than 25 years as a teacher, a program and fitness director, an international presenter and an author. She is the education project manager for *Balanced Body* and the author of *Pilates Illustrated* (Human Kinetics). Portia has a bachelor's in cognitive science from UCSD, and is PMA-, ACE- and AFAA-certified.



Q. I take public transportation to work. What's the best way to sit without completely neglecting my alignment during a long commute?

A. This is a question I often ask myself, especially when taking mass transit in NYC. Whether you take the train or bus to work, **external forces as you travel** are **constantly changing** and impacting the way you hold yourself. There really is **no better way to prepare** yourself than by **regularly practicing** classical Pilates, which helps increase your flexibility, strengthen the muscles around your spine (for stability, length and lift) and heighten your everyday awareness.

The best way to maintain alignment while sitting on the train is to sit your hips all the way back against the seat back. **Sit tall on your sit bones**, lifting your spine out of your hips. Work your **abdominals in and up** to align the top rim of your pelvis, base of your ribs, tips of your shoulder blades and the center of your head against the seat back. **For an added challenge**, keep your **back slightly off the seat back**, using your core to help you balance upright on your sit bones. **If you like to read, prop a tall bag on your lap**, and place your book on top so that your gaze stays lifted. **Avoid crossing your legs**, which could reduce blood flow to your pelvis and lower extremities as well as affect the alignment of your pelvis and put undue pressure on your sacroiliac joints.

I remember listening to a story that Kathy Grant once told me about how when she was in her 80s, she was pushed down in the subway. She said that even though she may have fallen, it was the method that enabled her to get right up again. Touché! —Lesly Levy

» Lesly Levy, PMA-CPT, a veteran of the fitness field for more than 25 years, is a senior teacher trainer for Power Pilates and member of the Power Pilates Curriculum Committee. She's a senior instructor at Uptown Pilates in Manhattan, where she also instructs clients under her company, Pilates on Tap. Lesly regularly travels within the U.S. as well as internationally, including at the ECA and PMA conferences, to teach for Power Pilates.



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Q+A

Q. Is ghee really healthier than butter?

A. Ghee is essentially **clarified butter**, where **milk solids and water are removed** during heating, **leaving only the milk fat** itself. Traditionally used for centuries as a staple in Indian cuisine, as well as in Ayurvedic medicine for its antioxidant-rich and immune-boosting properties, ghee has found its way into mainstream diets as an alternative to regular butter.

There are **many advantages to using ghee**. For starters, there's **little to no trace of lactose** (milk sugar), which might make it a better option if you're sensitive to the stuff. (But **ghee may still contain small amounts of milk proteins**, so check with your doctor first if you suffer from a milk allergy.) It also **contains gut-friendly butyric acid**, a short-chain fatty acid known to promote better digestion and help reduce inflammation. Ghee has a **higher smoke point than butter**, making it more versatile for cooking, although it has a **distinctive nutty taste** that may or may not be appealing. And unlike butter, ghee **doesn't necessarily need to be refrigerated** and has a **long shelf life** when stored properly.

For years, butter was viewed mainly as heart unhealthy because of its high saturated-fat and cholesterol content. A **recent study**, however, **showed no significant association between butter intake and an increased risk of heart disease**. **Butter and ghee contain many of the same vitamins** (A, D, E), but **butter has slightly fewer calories** (102 per tablespoon) than ghee (112).

Since **both ghee and butter are fats** located at the top of the food pyramid, the American Heart Association **recommends that they be consumed sparingly**. The good news is that a little bit goes a long way. —Leslie Dantchik



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Q. What exactly is carrageenan? Is it "natural"?

A. Carrageenan is a **food additive** frequently found in **both conventional and organic dairy and non-dairy products**. Made from **red seaweed**, it's been used for decades by the food industry as a **stabilizer and thickener** to help **increase the shelf life and improve the taste** of a wide variety of everyday foods and beverages, such as yogurt, ice cream, salad dressing, cottage cheese, deli meat, juices and shakes, as well as nutritional supplements, protein powder and infant formula.

Even though carrageenan comes from a natural source, it's **technically considered a synthetic ingredient**.

Aside from its role as an emulsifying agent, **carrageenan is indigestible and offers zero nutritional value**. And while approved and generally **considered safe by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration**, its **use has been controversial**.

Animal studies have shown an **association with carrageenan and an increase in gastrointestinal inflammation and other issues**, such as ulcerative colitis, some cancers and even insulin resistance, a marker for diabetes. And although there's **limited research** regarding the toxicity of carrageenan to humans, there are those in the scientific community who believe there is cause for concern. As a result, the **National Organic Standards Board recently removed it from their approved list of substances to use in foods labeled "USDA Organic."**

Even though **the jury is still out** on the effects of this omnipresent food additive, it might be advisable for those who suffer from gastric issues to avoid products containing carrageenan. Bottom line: Be informed and know what's in your food by carefully reading labels. —L.D.

» Nutrition expert Leslie Dantchik, MS, is the author of the health blog www.alphabitesnyc.com. The longtime Pilates and exercise enthusiast has a master's in applied physiology and nutrition from Teachers College, Columbia University.



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Q. Knee hyperextension is such a common issue. How can I help clients protect their knee joints, especially in a group class setting?

A. Knee hyperextension is an issue that every teacher will have to deal with at some point. The most **widely accepted approach in the Pilates industry** is teaching the client to achieve a **straight alignment of the knee joint** (180 degrees), yet the **cueing often used serves as a “Band-Aid”**—not a permanent solution. Here are some examples:

“Don’t lock the knees.”
 “Don’t straighten the knees completely.”
 “Work with soft knees.”
 “Keep the knees a little bent.”
 “Relax the back of the knee.”

While these **cues will probably prevent the knees from going into hyperextension**, they will also **result in a joint that is unstable**, and in **muscle development that is unsupportive or unbalanced**—aka not functional at all.

The structural design (bones) of the knee joint provides a relatively stable joint that is further supported by ligaments, tendons, muscles and menisci. **To achieve a functionally stable joint**, we must utilize the **concept of co-contraction**, which involves a synergistic contraction of the agonist and antagonist muscle—in this case, the knee extensors and knee flexors. Contraction of the medial and lateral muscles of the knee and hip joints will add further stability to the structure.

In terms of cueing, I **encourage contracting the knee extensors while at the same time contracting the knee flexors**. The result is a very stable joint that is well aligned. A **straight line is the strongest position** in terms of weight bearing, and the most efficient in terms of energy expenditure; the joint is aligned with the forces of nature, namely, gravity. This will also help ensure correct tracking of the patella—essential for good knee mechanics. Now to the most difficult task: teaching the client to feel that straight line. This relies less on muscle activation and more on imagery and tactile cueing. —*Rael Isacowitz*

» Rael Isacowitz, MA, has been practicing Pilates for more than 35 years, and is the founder and director of BASI Pilates, a comprehensive Pilates education organization spanning the globe established in 1989. Rael designed the concepts for BASI Systems equipment and was a driving force in founding the company. He also created Pilates Interactive, the one-of-a-kind learning software, and has authored two best-selling books, *Pilates* and *Pilates Anatomy (Human Kinetics)*, the latter co-authored with Karen Clippinger.



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