



# G A T E W A Y   T O   B A L A N C E

## Pilates Homework - Beginners

### Safety First!

These exercises are aimed at people who have already learnt them during formal Pilates lessons. Please **'listen'** to your body – if any of the exercises cause pain or aggravate an existing symptom, please stop immediately.

Here is a brief list of movements to avoid if you have been diagnosed with any of the following (*this is not exhaustive – if you're not sure, please ask*):

- **Osteoporosis/Osteopenia:** No forward bending (flexion) apart from low Spine Curls (i.e. no Curl Ups); No side bending (lateral flexion) instead do side reaching stretches keeping the spine 'stacked'; No loaded rotation e.g. waist twists whilst standing/sitting and no Hip Rolls (i.e. where legs are off the floor)
- **Spondylolithesis / Stenosis:** No spinal extension in the area affected – often located in lumbar spine (i.e. great care with Diamond Press & Darts)
- **Disc Injury:** Whilst the disc is healing no forward bending / flexion (e.g. Curl Ups & Spine Curls) and no Rotation (e.g. Arm Opening)
- **Hip Replacements:** Do not flex the hip beyond 90° (take care with the Hip Flexor Stretch); do not internally rotate; do not bring the leg across the mid line (i.e. doing a IT Band stretch)
- **Sacro-Iliac Joint Dysfunction:** No asymmetrical leg movements (i.e. legs move in opposite directions) e.g. Hip Flexor Stretches or Single Leg Stretch.

### The Basics

**Neutral Pelvis:** Make sure that your pubic bone & hip bones are level with each other (remember the 4 points of the Pelvic Compass) – you should have a small curve in your lumbar spine (i.e. it should neither be flat nor too deeply curved).

**Breathing:** throughout the exercises, the basic rule is

- Breathe In - to prepare (and concentrate on lengthening your spine)
- Breathe Out - to stabilise (see below) and move

Please try to breathe in a balanced/natural way (keeping your jaw, neck & shoulders relaxed). However, the most important thing is, **do not hold your breath!!**

**Stabilisation:** To stabilise your pelvis, 'lift' your pelvic floor (think of drawing 4 points of a diamond together – pubic bone; tailbone; both sitting bones) – remember not to clench your buttocks. Try practising this by gently engaging your core stabilising muscles and then gently releasing them. Your pelvis should remain 'quiet' throughout (i.e. minimise any movement).

**Ribcage Closure:** In the Relaxation Position (see below), place your hands on the sides of your lower ribs (fingers pointing towards each other); focus on breathing **in** to your hands feeling the lower ribs moving apart and as you breathe **out** use your hands to assist guiding the lower ribs back towards each other, like a gentle corset with the front of your ribcage sinking. Once you've got the hang of this, add in the stabilisation technique described above.

**Repetitions:** Do 6-8 repetitions of each exercise. You should do an even number of repetitions to each side.

**Stretches:** Should only be performed on 'warm muscles'; Hold for 20-30 seconds.

## The Exercises

**RELAXATION POSITION** (lie on your back, pelvis neutral, knees bent and feet hip width apart in parallel, heels should be under your knees – feet evenly weighted heel, big toe & little toe)

**Neck Rolls:** Gently roll your head from side to side – breathe naturally!

**Tip:** Think of sliding the back of your head as you roll to the side.

**Watchpoint:** Only work within a comfortable range for your neck.

**Chin Tucks:** Breathe in to lengthen the back of your neck, drop chin to chest

**Tip:** Really focus on lengthening the neck, without creating tension. You should feel the stretch at the top of your neck.

**Watchpoint:** Maintain the weight of your skull on the cushion.

**Leg Slides:** As you breathe out, stabilise and slowly slide one heel away from you (i.e. lengthen the leg & keeping the heel on the floor); take a breath in and then as you breathe out, stabilise and slide the heel back to the starting position (i.e. bending the knee). Repeat on the other side.

**Tip:** Gently press your supporting foot (e.g. if you are sliding your right heel away, press the left foot down) into the floor to help you stabilise. Imagine you are moving away/towards the related Sitz Bone (e.g. sliding your right heel away from your right Sitz Bone and sliding it back towards your right Sitz Bone)

**Watchpoint:** Your spine & pelvis should remain “quiet” throughout (i.e. minimise any movement). Ensure that your whole body relaxed (including your jaw, neck & shoulders relaxed). Note if you have any variance in control between your left & right sides.

**Knee Drops:** As you breathe out, stabilise and let one knee drop out to the side (the feet both remain on the ground); take a breath in and then as you breathe out, stabilise and bring the knee back to the starting position. Repeat on the other side.

**Tip:** Gently press your supporting foot into the floor to help you stabilise. Keep the “other” knee still. Imagine you are moving from your pelvic floor (or Sitz Bones); so when the knee drops out to the side, those muscles fibres are lengthening and when you bring the knee back, think of those fibres shortening.

**Watchpoint:** Your spine & pelvis should remain “quiet” throughout (i.e. minimise any movement). Ensure that your whole body relaxed (including your jaw, neck & shoulders relaxed). Note if you have any variance in control between your left & right sides.

**Knee Folds:** As you breathe out, stabilise and float one leg up to 90°; take a breath in and then as you breathe out, stabilise and float the leg back down to the floor.

**Tip:** Gently press your supporting foot into the floor to help you stabilise. Keep the knee at a constant angle – move from your hip.

**Watchpoint:** Your spine & pelvis should remain ‘quiet’ throughout (i.e. minimise any movement). Ensure that your whole body remains relaxed (including your jaw, neck & shoulders).

**Spine Curls:** As you breathe out, start with a very small ‘north’ pelvic tilt and then send your knees over your feet as you peel your spine off the mat (move one vertebra at a time up and down). Stop when resting between your shoulder blades (the ‘bridge position’). Breathe in, and as you exhale start to release the spine back onto the mat.

**Tip:** Start with a smaller range and build up as your back loosens. Take multiple breaths on the way ‘up’ and ‘down’. Focus on lengthening your spine.

**Watchpoint:** Do not clench your buttocks (your hamstrings will be working!). Keep your hip bones at an even height throughout. Keep weight even on both feet – knees stay a constant distance (i.e. hips width) apart.

**Curl Ups:** Clasp your hands behind your head, elbows in your peripheral vision (make sure your hands are supporting your head). As you breathe out, stabilise, do a very gentle Chin Tuck (see above) and then think of pressing your mid-back into the mat as you lift the upper body off the floor. Breathe in and as you exhale, gently release back down to the floor.

**Tip:** Work within a comfortable range; Think of lengthening your spine throughout the exercise. When you breathe in, try to focus on expanding the sides of the ribs and not into the abdominals.

**Watchpoint:** Stop if you feel any tension in your neck. Your pelvis should remain 'quiet' (i.e. in neutral) throughout. Keep the elbows a constant distance apart.

**Shoulder Drops:** Float both arms up to the ceiling, elbows long, palms facing shoulder width apart. As you breathe in, gently reach both arms up to the ceiling and as you exhale gently release the arms as your shoulders melt back onto the floor

**Tip:** Work within a comfortable range. As your arms release back down, try to 'think' of a little outward spiral in your upper arm.

**Watchpoint:** Do not lock your elbows; Keep your arms a constant distance apart.

**Flies (Beach Ball Arms):** Float both arms up to the ceiling, palms facing. Bend your elbows as if hugging a beach ball. As you breathe in, let your arms release out to the side (i.e. away from each other). As you breathe out, stabilise and keeping your collar bones wide bring your arms back towards each other.

**Tip:** Work within a comfortable range; Take another in breath when the arms are furthest apart to get a bigger stretch.

**Watchpoint:** Keep your shoulder blades in contact with the mat at all times.

**Backstroke:** Float both arms up to the ceiling, elbows long, palms facing shoulder width apart. As you breathe out allow one arm to go backwards (i.e. by your ear) and the other goes forward (i.e. by your waist). As you breathe in, bring both arms back to the starting position. As you breathe out, reverse the arm movement.

**Tip:** Work within a comfortable range; as the arm goes backwards allow the shoulder to slide down your back (do not press it down hard though!). Keep the collarbones wide (i.e. you are not trying to "shave your ear off!"). Do not expect each arm to move by exactly the same amount.

**Watchpoint:** Keep your shoulder blades in contact with the mat at all times and that the ribcage does not lift off the mat (see Ribcage Closure).

## **PRONE POSITION** (Lie on your front with feet hip width apart in parallel)

**Diamond Press:** Fold arms into diamond shape, rest head on hands, as you breathe out, stabilise (it is important to stabilise throughout esp. 'hugging' your abdominals) push down lightly on your hands to raise head and upper body off the floor, pelvis stays neutral. Breathe in at 'the top' (keep stabilising) and as you breathe out, lower body back to the start position.

**Tip:** Keep your neck long (i.e. don't tip your head back) – only work within a range that it is comfortable – this may be quite small.

**Watchpoint:** Stop if you feel it in your lower back (you should only feel it gently between your shoulder blades). When you have finished doing this exercise always go into the Rest Position (see below).

**Rest Position:** Sit back on your heels (heels together & knees apart), then fold forward at the hips and rest your chest on/between your knees. Your arms are stretched out overhead, resting on the floor. Just breathe here for at least 20-30 seconds.

**Tip:** Focus on the breath – both into the abdominals & the ribs. Think of lengthening the spine as you breathe deeply.

**Watchpoint:** Do not force your body into this position; you can compromise on both the leg/back (your pelvis doesn't have to rest on the heels – just try to keep the lower back a little rounded) and arm position (i.e. you could wrap them around by your feet). Use your hands to support you as you come out of this position, keep the spine rounded (i.e. do not arch your lower back).

**SIDE LYING 1** (Lie on your side, lower arm above your head, cushion on arm, head on cushion. Ensure that you line up the back of your head, ribs & pelvis.)

**Oyster:** Legs slightly bent, feet in line with your bottom. As you breathe out, open your leg from the hip, knee towards ceiling, feet stay together. As you breathe in, gently release back to the start position.

**Tip:** Keep your heels pressed together. You should feel your 'gluts' working, but if it is mostly in your leg, change your leg position.

**Watchpoint:** Keep your pelvis quiet. Stop if it feels uncomfortable.

**SIDE LYING 2** (Lie on your side, both arms out in front of you, head at front of thick cushion, hips & knees at 90°. Ensure that you line up the back of your head, ribs & pelvis.)

**Arm Openings:** Breathe in as you raise your arm up to the ceiling, rotate the spine to take it behind you (keep your eyes focussed on the hand, letting your head rotate), breathe out as you rotate back to centre and lower your arm

**Tip:** Work within a comfortable range. Keep your upper elbow (& thumb) soft.

**Watchpoint:** Don't let your arm drop below the shoulder; keep your pelvis quiet.

## **STRETCHES IN RELAXATION POSITION** *(see above)*

**Hip Flexor Stretch:** Place a cushion under your bottom, to keep you into a posterior / north tilt (i.e. your lower back should be resting on the mat). Float one knee towards your chest and hold with both hands, whilst straightening the other leg along floor.

**Tip:** Use a band/scarf/belt behind the elevated knee, if you cannot comfortably support it with your hands. You could also add in some Ankle Circles, working the elevated foot.

**Watchpoint:** Keep your upper body relaxed. Remember to breathe!

**Hamstring Stretch:** Place a band around the ball of one foot, lengthen the leg along the floor. Keeping the tailbone down, elevate this leg up until you feel a gentle stretch in the back of the mid-thigh (it may be helpful to slightly soften the knee).

**Tip:** If you don't have a band, use a belt or scarf. Make sure the band is working 'hard' and cross it over, before resting your elbows on the ground. You could also add in some Ankle Point/Flexes, working the elevated foot.

**Watchpoint:** Keep your upper body relaxed. Remember to breathe!