

Centerworks® Pilates Institute

Education for Empowerment and the Improvement of Whole-Body Health

“A man is as young as his spinal column. If your spine is inflexibly stiff at 30, you are old. If it is completely flexible at 60, you are young.” -- Joseph H. Pilates

Mastering Movement of the Spine: The Roll Up

It seems that one of the primary differences between Pilates and “traditional” weight room workouts for developing fitness is the emphasis on a strong center with a flexible spine. For most exercises in the weight room the back is supported on a bench and held in a still “neutral” position while strengthening the arms & legs. With Pilates, the body is taught how to move with the spine supported, unsupported, face up, face, down, sideways, kneeling, right side up, upside down, flexed arched, rotated, held still, and in motion, and still developing strength and flexibility for the arms and legs. Emphasis placed on finding the correct muscles to support the body regardless of the back position. This trains the body to be prepared and ready to move safely without having to think, overwork, or recruit muscles that don’t need to be involved in sport and daily life activities.

Our Spine should have 3 natural curves that support us for movement and shock absorption: In the neck the cervical curve is in extension. Through the upper and mid-back, the thoracic curve is in flexion, and the low back/lumbar curve is in extension to complement the neck. Each vertebra is an independent segment and has the potential for movement in flexion, extension, lateral flexion/side bending, and rotation. The goal for good movement is to balance the work evenly throughout the entire spine. Post-lateral rib breathing, good hip mechanics, and shoulder mechanics play an important role in being able to move the spine freely. Being able to maintain good posture puts the body in alignment to begin safely moving the spine. Incorrect posture, places additional stress on the body and can make it more difficult to get the body organized for efficient movement.

Flexion or forward bending is the first direction of movement to practice. Bending forward strengthens the abdominals and stretches both the neck and low back muscles. The Roll Up is one of the first Matwork exercises that is taught to develop a young and flexible spine. For most new students, getting each segment to articulate and roll up and down sequentially is a big challenge. In group Matwork classes, there’s nothing to hold the legs down for assistance. The “mats” that Joe used had a strap at one end, so clients who weren’t as strong could hook their feet for awhile and have some help getting up. With private training clients – utilizing the roll down bar on the Trapeze Table is a wonderful way to provide assistance while learning how to get each segment moving and successfully teach good articulation of the spine.



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Here are a few good tips for executing a successful and articulate Roll Up.

1. Inhale all the way to a good Hundred's position. If you burn your whole inhale just to lift the arms to the ceiling – you'll run out of air when you need it most.
2. Exhale before you hit your weak spot and it's a challenge to get up. Continue a strong, forceful exhale while you contract your abdominals and peel yourself off the mat. (If you hold your breath it will stop the forward momentum needed to keep you moving.)
3. Don't grab your legs and bend your arms to get up – you're only strengthening your biceps. Instead press your straight arms & hands against the sides of your legs and slide them from your thighs to your ankles – If you're not bending the elbows and hiking the shoulders to your ears, you'll have a better chance of bending and getting the abdominals to participate in flexing the spine.
4. If your feet lift up as you roll up the weight of the legs lifting will drive your upper body backwards and inhibit your ability to get up. Stay active with the backs of your thighs pressing into the mat to help anchor the legs, inner thighs squeezing, and knees straight but unlocked.
5. **The pelvis has to change positions!** In your starting position your pelvis is horizontal to the Mat. As you roll up, once you've articulated from the head to the hips, allow the pelvis to change positions and move to a more vertical angle as you reach for your toes. Move the pelvis first on the way back down then roll one by one from the lower back to the head.

As I'm writing this, I'm thinking of many other choices for Roll Up tips. My list of ways to help clients find the things they are missing seems endless, and there always seems to be yet another good cue, tip, modification, or exercise to tweak things just a little more for improvement and success. There is no one special cue that will work for everybody, so having a variety of things to think about can be helpful in creating challenge and thoughtful workouts for continued progress. In my personal experience – Rolling exercises are much more difficult earlier in the day, the more my body is warmed up, the more articulate my spine, and then some days it's easy, and others....well modifications are good! Rolling backwards evenly and with control, feeling each segment of the spine connect to the mat is the eccentric strength work needed for the abdominals, while gravity helps open and stretch the back. In the long run, rolling down well will help you roll back up.



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