



Is it all just a load of Pilates?

The backlash against the wonder workout Gwyneth and Jen swear by has begun. **Deirdre Reynolds** gets to the core of the matter

IT'S the world-famous exercise credited with the toned tums of stars such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Beyoncé and Jennifer Aniston.

But there's bad news for women who've spent the past decade stretching, contorting and heavy breathing in a sweaty yoga studio in pursuit of the perfect body — you may have been better off sitting at home watching telly instead.

At least, that's according to fresh claims that the founding principles of Pilates have been flawed all along.

With our desire for a washboard stomach at a feverish high, gyms across the country seem obsessed with 'the core' — the deeply embedded stomach muscles that wrap around our midriffs like a corset — in recent years.

And whether it's endless sit-ups like Victoria Beckham or hot yoga like Madonna, Ireland's gym bunnies are literally blue in the face engaging theirs.

Until now, we've been told that core stability — and the endless stomach sucking-in that goes with it — will help us stand tall, look slimmer and reinforce the spine.

But now that message which has been so, well, core to fitness classes, including Pilates, has been debunked by experts who say chasing an ironclad core could be futile or even unsafe.

The problem, they point out, began in the mid-'90s when Australian scientists probing the causes of back pain made a seemingly ground-breaking discovery.

Strapping electrodes to volunteers with both healthy and bad backs before doing rapid arm raises, the Queensland University study showed how the brains of healthy subjects sent signals to the transversus abdominus muscle to support the spine just before the arms moved.

There was no such response in those with back problems, leaving the spine vulnerable to injury.

The research concluded that the all-important trans ab muscle — and thus the back, itself — could be reinforced by 'tucking in' or 'hollowing out' (drawing the navel towards the spine) the stomach while exercising.

Despite no conclusive evidence, the theory rippled from labs to gyms, transforming core strength into the Holy Grail of fitness practically overnight in the mid-'90s.

But you can breathe out now, as experts are urgently trying to debunk the core stability myth.

"The fitness industry took a piece

of information and ran with it," says Thomas Nesser, an Indiana State University professor researching the explosion of core-based exercises like Pilates.

"The assumption of 'if a little is good, then more must be better' was applied to core training and it was completely blown out of proportion."

"Too many workouts are entirely dedicated to the core these days, agrees personal trainer John Lark of Sphere Fitness Studio, Dublin and Kildare.

"Core stability has its place in the tool box to fitness," he says, "but it's just one part of the overall picture."

In an image-obsessed era, our concentration on all things core could have more to do with a cheese-grater stomach than protecting our backs.

"I think the current obsession with the core stems from our aesthetic craving for the six-pack look," he adds.

"Core training can be window dressing for the flat abs look. It seems everyone nowadays rattles off the word 'core' without actually knowing what it means."

"Your core strength is linked to

your shoulder function, respiratory muscles, back muscles and so on, so to attempt to isolate your 'core' is pure nonsense."

Whatever about the pursuit of a six pack, is the erstwhile epusol of core work in the battle against a bad back a load of medicine balls too?

Two years ago, a controversial paper in the British Journal of Sports Medicine suggested that, far from preventing back ache, too much core work could actually damage a perfectly healthy back.

"Too much emphasis is placed on working the transversus abdominis and if people follow that advice they are misguided and will not achieve better movement or less pain," says professor of spine biomechanics Stuart McGill.

The professor's pet peeve is the widespread instruction in exercise classes including Pilates to 'draw in' and 'hollow out' the stomach: "In studies we have done, the amount of load the spine could bear was greatly reduced when subjects sucked in their belly buttons. What happens is that the muscles are brought closer to the spine, which reduces the stability in the back. It becomes weak and wobbly as you try to move."

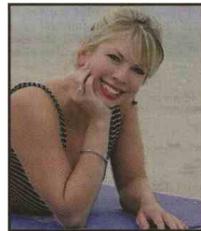
As physiotherapists report a growing number of people who have suffered back problems because of poor Pilates technique, the exercise of the stars has gotten a particularly bad rap recently.

Defending the popular form of yoga, Cork-based Pilates instruc-

tor Hayley Jones believes such injuries have less to do with the shortcomings of core stability than the shortcomings of its teachers.

"In Pilates, the core is called the powerhouse," she says, "but that doesn't mean you should work on it to the detriment of the rest of the body. The core is just one cog in a well-oiled machine."

"I see people coming to classes who think that to engage the core you simply suck in your belly button or get too caught up in their breathing technique — as far as I'm concerned, that's down to bad teaching."



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"The core incorporates everything from the lower back to the ribs, thighs, pelvic floor and abdomen; it isn't just one muscle that you can isolate and lift and its up to the instructor to explain that."

"In any given class, I could have a 60-year-old woman with a back problem and a 20-year-old guy, who wants to work up a sweat," adds Hayley, who runs a class at Douglas GAA Sports Hall. "But Pilates is not 'One Size Fits All', so it's important to ensure everybody sticks to their own pace."

"It's only when you've got a shy one down the back with a back problem they haven't told you about or someone who insists on pushing themselves too far that things go wrong."

Despite the latest scientific backlash, core stability still has a key role in back care, says Dr **Liz Owen Farrell** of the **Chiropractic Association of Ireland**.

"Core exercises — once done correctly and monitored by a professional — are great for those with lower back pain as they re-train the muscles and spine to work properly," she says. "The main problem is that some people stop concentrating on controlling the contractions and do the exercises too quickly so they don't work."

"Anecdotally, lots of clients tell me that Pilates has helped them with sciatic pain," adds instructor Hayley. "Unfortunately, what happens a lot of the time is that they

don't keep the classes up."

What about those of us who've spent hours, days or even years spread-eagled across a yoga mat to achieve an A-list torso rather than improve our posture — does the 'window dressing' work?

"Pilates is indicative of what people want from exercise nowadays," says personal trainer John Lark, "quick, effortless solutions to something that takes hard work and discipline. We are willing to lie on our backs, expend zero energy and think we are flattening our abs. But the next time you're in a Pilates class, look around and see how many people have six-packs."

So where does that leave a generation who have spent what some commentators are calling a "lost decade" navel-gazing in gyms based on a theory that's now under attack?

Core strength is still important, but there's no silver bullet for a supermodel body, admits Hayley Jones.

"Women will come to the class and think they'll have a body like Madonna's in six weeks," she says. "It doesn't work like that."

Don't throw in the Pilates towel just yet, though.

"Obviously, it has to be done in conjunction with a healthy diet and varied exercise regime," she counters of accusations that even advanced Pilates classes only burn around the same amount of calories as a steady walk.

"But Pilates has proven itself beyond some celebrity fad and will be around for a long time to come."