



## ‘The Plank’ - is it a useful exercise?

The Plank is one of the most talked about and popular gym exercises. It has become a major trend and is advocated by various fitness professionals as a ‘core exercise’ that can help to ‘develop strength in the core, shoulders, arms, and glutes’, [Mens Health](#)

If you are not aware, the plank is described in fitness literature as an exercise where the individual props themselves up on their forearms and maintains this position for a period of time. It has become a competitive exercise, to the point where ‘plank offs’ - where people try to hold this position for as long as possible without collapsing – are taking place.

There is current debate in the media, and questions are being asked by medical professionals, as to the value of the plank as an exercise. It has certainly gained both positive and negative press. A recent article in the [Daily Mail](#) gave a damning report as told by a lady who suffered chronic pain as a result of planking.

In reply to this we decided to ask the expert opinions of our dual-qualified Pilates Instructors/Personal trainers and Physiotherapists at LCP to see where they stand on the planking phenomenon.

### Ask our Experts



**Marilyn Percival**  
Personal Trainer  
and Pilates Instructor

Like lots of fitness exercises I think the plank is often mis-taught, badly performed and potentially damaging. Does this make it a bad exercise? No it doesn't!

A well-functioning body should be able to support its own weight through the arms in plank position with attention given to each body component (head / neck / shoulder / low back / pelvis). If used as part of a moving exercise it can be hugely beneficial.

Pilates is not about the static, stressful holding of positions, it is about being strong through movement. It has many exercises that use a plank like position, usually held for only a breath or two that can help make the body strong and balanced.



**Paul Brookland Williams**  
Personal Trainer  
and Pilates Instructor

My overriding thought upon reading the article in the Daily Mail, is to highlight to people that Pilates is not a competitive sport. Joseph Pilates only ever did short repetitions over a short duration of time, with a strong focus on technique.

Having received training directly from both Pilates experts that I quote here, I advocate carefully introducing planking into a Pilates workout. Lynne Robertson (Director of Body Control Pilates) highlights that the plank is not an official Pilates exercise, however, Leg-pull Front includes a plank posture. I also agree with Glen Withers (Founder of APPI), that the plank is a good exercise, and can be beneficial for patients with back pain to increase core strength.



*Leg-pull Front*

I personally include Planking within my classes, although I place a strong emphasis on correct upper body placement (i.e. head, neck, elbow and shoulder placement) and a focus on core support and good breathing. My intention is that this plank will eventually develop into Leg-pull front, so I only hold it for the duration that I would to complete six alternating leg lifts (15 to 20 seconds). I feel it is counterproductive to hold it any longer. Would you hold a shoulder press for four minutes? No, your arm and shoulder would become over-exerted. So why hold a Plank for four minutes?



**Diane Purton**  
Personal Trainer  
and Pilates Instructor

The plank is a very popular move in group fitness classes and gym routines. People tend to use a basic forward plank position as a quick core stability fix, however there is so much more to planking! The plank has many variations that can become sports specific and strength building, such as knee drops for runners and rotation for golfers.

In my Pilates classes I use variations on a plank in order to set the body up for other more complex moves. At no point would I suggest holding a plank or variation for longer than three or four breaths, in order to stabilise the shoulders and pelvis. I add movement when strength levels are appropriate and the body is ready.

I would not encourage a competitive 'plank off' hold as it can drive the blood pressure up, and there are many other useful moves that can build overall technique and strength, along with movement.



**Sarah Woodhouse**  
Personal Trainer  
and Pilates Instructor

Despite the sensationalism of the article in the Daily Mail, I think there is a place for the plank in a Pilates class provided the students are given specific, individual instruction on their form and limitations and they are taught in a non-competitive environment.

In a good Pilates class, each student's form will be monitored throughout the exercise and some will be advised to stop the exercise or modify it if they are losing their form, or the moment they experience inappropriate discomfort or pain. I would advise members of the public to choose specialist Pilates facilities with small class sizes and well-qualified, experienced staff.



**Martine Cooper**  
Chartered Physiotherapist

As a Physiotherapist, I have treated individuals for shoulder and low back pain resulting from the static holding of a plank position.

The word static is important, as the plank is also an exercise used dynamically (with movement) in the transition of exercises in Yoga and Pilates. In a gym environment, the press-up is essentially a dynamic plank - weight bearing on the hands but with bending and straightening of the elbows

The key words here are dynamic and functional. It is useful if an exercise can relate to a function of everyday living. When in day-to-day life would we prop our self-up on our elbows for several minutes?

The static plank position, which involves weight bearing on the elbows for extended periods, tends to cause over activity of the pectoral muscles in a shortened position which, in turn, can lead to shoulder and neck pain. Of course, if the lower back is not maintained in a correct position, this may also lead to back pain.

As Paul and Diane suggest there are many dynamic alternative exercises to the static plank that can achieve excellent results. When used as part of a dynamic exercise, the plank can be a useful position. However, there does need to be attention to good form, individual capabilities and injury history. That is when instruction from an experienced fitness professional or Physiotherapist can be invaluable.

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**If you want any further advice, a 1:1 assessment or to join in a Pilates class please call 0207 236 3334 or visit [London City Pilates](https://www.londoncitypilates.com)**