

Seated Pilates: A Step-by-Step Guide

“This is the first form of exercise, that I have found to be truly accessible, that actually works our muscles, whilst not pushing the limitations of bodies with chronic health conditions”



Welcome!

Welcome to our Seated Pilates guide, especially for those with Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS).

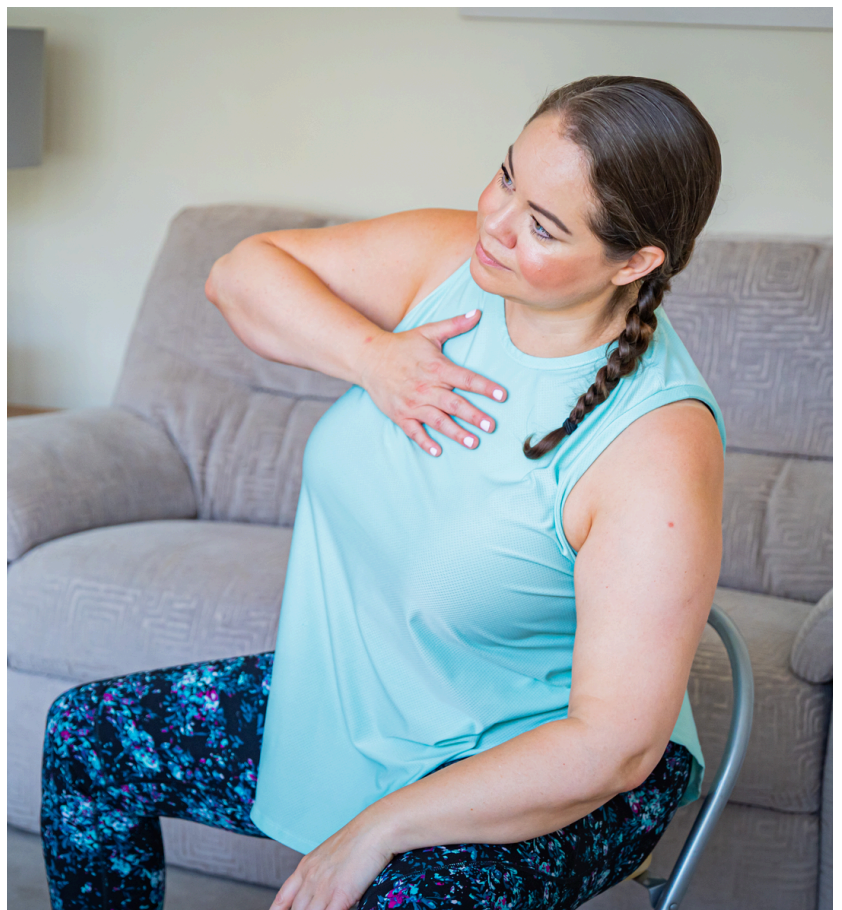
Leanne is a Pain-Free Movement Specialist and Pilates Teacher with lived experience of multiple chronic illnesses, and runs a social enterprise that makes exercise accessible and adapted for those with long-term health conditions and mobility issues.

To use this guide, you might like to pick out an exercise, try it, see how you feel and then if you have no adverse effects try another.

Please take this slowly and gently, listen to your body, and allow time for plenty of rest.

Please note, the author Leanne English is not a medical professional, and you should always follow the advice from your health professionals in relation to your readiness to exercise.

If you have any questions please contact Leanne at info@mobilates.com.



Introduction to Pilates

During World War 1, Joseph Pilates created a series of exercises to help his fellow prisoners of war recover from injury and illness. He even used their beds and springs to create what is now known as the Reformer. These exercises became known as Contrology. It was only after Joseph died that they were named Pilates.

Today, the series of classical exercises are still widely used as they are known to have massive remedial benefits for everyone, not just those who are ill or injured. However, many of the moves are too challenging or possibly unsafe for those of us with long-term health conditions. So below you will see some moves based on Pilates that are adapted for those with MCAS so that they are more easily accessible and safer for you to do in your own time.

As always, please speak to your healthcare team before starting any new activity, especially if you have complex health needs or are managing frequent symptoms. And remember, listening to your body is key - rest is just as important as movement.



Getting started

We know that starting or returning to exercise can bring up some really difficult feelings, especially if you've had negative experiences in the past. You might have felt unwell during or after movement, struggled with pain or fatigue, or found yourself with an instructor who wasn't confident in supporting your needs. You may have felt like the odd one out—unable to keep up, or simply not managing in the way others seemed to.

For people living with MCAS, movement can be particularly challenging. Exercise can be a trigger for symptoms, and the uncertainty around what your body might do can feel overwhelming. It's completely understandable if this has created barriers that feel hard to overcome.

But there is hope. With the right preparation, knowledge, and a gentle, tailored approach, some people find they can gradually build their tolerance and begin to experience the benefits of movement—less pain, improved energy, and a greater sense of strength and control.

This guide offers tips to help you get started safely, at your own pace, in a way that works for you.



Preparation before you exercise

These tips are to help you stay safe, increase your confidence and enable you to have a positive experience so that you will be able to keep up a routine of beneficial moves that you know you can do without suffering as a result:

- If you use medication to manage your MCAS, speak to your medical professional about whether it might be helpful to pre-medicate before a class.
- Keep medication nearby and if you have an EpiPen, have that close to you. It is always best to be safe and prepared.
- Have a drink (or electrolytes if you use them) nearby and keep sipping slowly to keep your hydration levels up.
- Consider the temperature of the room. Do you need a window open? Do you need to wear cooler or warmer clothes?
- Have your phone within reach and let someone else know what you are doing, so they can check in on you, or are close by so you can call for help should you need it.
- Check your surroundings are safe, that there are no trip hazards or doors that can open in and hit you.
- Minimise distractions such as children, pets or TV. This is an opportunity to focus on your body, and getting distracted can lead to accidents.

"Strengthening my core has helped me to support my posture better when I'm standing."



During Exercise

The most important thing you can do when beginning to take part in physical activity (after preparing), is to listen to your body. Sometimes this is hard to do, especially if you have lived for years with pain. Your body will tell you how it is feeling, and getting in touch with these signals will really help you to benefit safely.

Imagine a bar. If you jump over that bar, you might hit your head on the ceiling. However, if you stay under the bar, you will be safe from the ceiling. In time, you will be able to push the bar up gradually towards the ceiling. This is how you could think about managing your triggers. If you stay below the threshold of what causes a reaction, you won't be adversely affected by the movement. Then, over time, you can increase your tolerance (raise your bar) and do more without negative effects.

"Sneak in under the radar and lift the bar without your body noticing".

If you're not used to moving, do a little bit, see how your body feels. If you feel ok, do a little bit more. Then take a break and see how your body feels afterwards, just in case you have a delayed reaction.

With the exercises in this guide, you might want to try one of the moves just once and finish there. Then, a couple of days later, try a one or two of the moves, just a couple of times. Increase slowly and gradually by either increasing the number of moves or increasing how many times you do them. Still keeping in touch with your body and how it is feeling.

Try to keep your heart rate low, there is no need to push yourself, you can increase your exercise tolerance gradually, but it will take some time and patience.

"Enjoyable and helping me to ease my way back into exercise within my tolerance levels."

Associated health conditions

Many people with MCAS have multiple health conditions and some of those conditions can also make exercise challenging. Here are a couple of tips for staying safe if you have the following:

Ehlers Danlos Syndromes or Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder

- Slow your movement down and pay attention to what your body is doing. Exercising in front of a mirror can be really helpful.
- Try not to stretch your body or force stretches no matter how good it feels. Move gently into a stretch and come out of it instead of holding it for sustained periods.
- Less is more with activating your core muscles. Think 20-30%. There is no need to brace. Breathing out is often enough to activate your core and pelvic floor. If you feel you need a bit more support for a move, gently pull your belly button to your spine and imagine it lifting.
- Try to keep your elbows and knees soft and don't lock them, especially if you are standing or holding weights.
- When moving your arms, try to keep your hands in your peripheral vision, this will help keep you from hyperextending.

Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome

- Seated or bed exercise is a great way to begin, as standing still or for long periods can be challenging.
- Compression gear may help some people, if you can tolerate it.
- Lie down or stop if symptoms start.
- If sitting from lying, standing from sitting, or coming up from a Roll Down (any postural changes) gently squeeze your legs, bum and tummy before moving up. Once you are up, take a breath then slowly release your muscles.

Other Health Considerations

Osteoporosis, ruptured discs or fused vertebrae

It is important to keep the spine moving even if we have spinal conditions that can be exacerbated or can cause injury if moving unsafely.

Please consult your health professional before starting or changing any exercise routine, especially if you have other health conditions that may affect mobility or safety.

These are some tips that can help to prevent injury:

- When doing any forward flexion (creating a small curve to the spine), keep it super small or consider hinging at the hips instead.
- Put your hands on your thighs to support your back when rolling forward, this means you are not loading your spine.
- Try not to do any spinal movements to extreme, so being careful when you rotate, reach to the side, bend forward and reach up.
- Keep breathing and try not to worry. The more anxious you are about moving, the stiffer you will be and this may also cause injury



Breathing

Deep diaphragmatic breathing and focusing on a longer exhale can help improve vagal tone and reduce the “fight or flight” and “freeze” response that can occur in people with chronic illnesses. Stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system can:

- **Slow your heart rate**
- **Slow your breathing rate**
- **Lower your blood pressure**
- **Help you digest food easier**
- **Calm your pain signals**
- **Reduce anxiety**



People in pain or with chronic health conditions like MCAS often have a less active parasympathetic nervous system so can find it harder to get your bodies into rest and exercise without adverse effects.

Breathing exercises

Try one of these exercises at a time to see how they help to prepare your body and your mind for exercise. As with all of the activities in this guide, please take them slowly, sample them to see how your body responds and try for a little longer the next time if it feels right to you. If you feel woozy, please try not to worry, your body may not be used to so much oxygen. However, do go back to breathing normally when you need to so you don't fall over.

- Inhale through your nose. Slowly, deeply, out through the mouth as long as you can. Try to make your out-breath longer than your in breath. You might like to try inhaling for a count of 4 and out for 6 and gradually increase the out-breath to 8, or even 10 when you feel ready.
- Breath in for 4 counts, hold for 4, breath out for 4 and hold for 4. Repeat smoothly and slowly.
- Inhale into your rib cage, imagine your lungs pressing your lower ribs out to the sides and expanding through your back. Then take the breath down to your belly feeling it fill with air. Exhale from your belly first and then your lungs. This one is slightly harder to do as it is a bit more complicated but it is a great way to start activating your core muscles gently.



Set up for seated exercise

If you set yourself up right for exercise then you are less likely to get hurt and your muscles will work in the right way to strengthen instead of strain. So follow these tips to enable you to look after your posture and your body ready to explore the exercises in this guide.

- Try to use a sturdy chair with no arms and has a flat bottom. Dining chairs are ideal for this.
- Sit towards the front of the chair, making sure you have plenty of bum on the chair, so you don't tip forward.
- Line your knees in front of your hips and your ankles underneath your knees.
- Sit tall, away from the back of your chair, relax your shoulders and breath.
- If you are not used to sitting upright without support, start slowly by trying it for a short amount of time then resting back against the chair. This can be increased with time so please don't force yourself to sit upright if your back starts to ache.



Warm up

This is a great way to start any seated exercise. It trains your body to know what is coming next and prepare for exercise plus it mobilises your hips, back, shoulders and neck.

- Exhale as you gently tilt your pubic bone towards your nose, tucking your tail bone underneath your body, inhale as you sit up tall resetting your pelvis. Repeat for a few breaths.
- Roll shoulders forward, up, back then down. This encourages that open shoulder posture and counteracts the typical rolled forward shoulder position. Do this a few times, slowly and smoothly, breathing deeply.
- Draw a small figure of 8 with your nose, gently increasing in size but being careful to keep your neck long and not hang your head backwards.



Feet and ankles

Feet often get very neglected and can get stiff and sore stuffed inside shoes all day. So, these exercises are great without your shoes on and can promote blood flow to your toes.



Scrunch your toes up gently, then flex them back softly trying to create gaps between each of your toes.

Lift your big toe while the others remain on the floor. Swap by lifting your toes and leaving the big toe on the floor. If you find this very difficult try not to worry, a lot of people find this very challenging. Watching your toes as you do it can help. Even using your fingers to encourage the movement. In time you will notice it become easier to encourage the movement.



Lift up both heels trying to keep your ankles strong and straight. You may need to look at them to check they are coming directly up and not tilting outwards.

Lift up the front of both feet, to include your toes and balls of your feet. Then lift up one heel and swap between the one foot with the heel lifted and one foot with your toes and balls lifted.



Write your name with your toes both feet going forwards and then writing your name backwards with both feet.



Arms and shoulders

We often support our arms by putting our hands in our pockets, crossing them in front of our chests or resting on chair arms. This can result in an increase in neck and shoulder tension as they then have to work hard to compensate for not being used to supporting themselves. These moves will help you to strengthen your arms and train your body not to recruit the muscles in your neck and shoulders.



Breathing in, lifting both arms to the height that is available to you without needing to lift your shoulders up. Exhale and lower.



Open your arms to a T position, relax your shoulders. Make tight circles with the arms in one direction and then the next. Stop before you get tired.



Bring your arms to an E position either side of your head, dip the hand forward but not down, then return back up.

Tuck your elbows in to your sides, rotate the hands outwards, rotate at the shoulders. Then return. Increase this by rotating outwards and squeezing the shoulder blades.



Lift your shoulders to your ears on an in breath, slowly lower them down on an exhale.



Lift both arms in front of your body, push them forwards, then draw the shoulder blades towards each other and retract back keeping the arms straight.



Legs and buttocks

Sometimes your legs and bum can miss out on strengthening when doing seated exercises. We spend a lot of our time sitting down, especially if you are living with long term pain and fatigue or you work long hours from a desk, so these muscles can become weak. Try these to help strengthen them as well as increase blood flow and reduce swelling.



Slide your foot forward, flex your foot then slide your foot back. When your leg is lengthened check that you are not hyperextending or bending your knee backwards. Keep it soft.



Keeping your knee bent, lift your knee upwards so it comes up above your hips, then lower it back down. Imagine drawing in your belly button slightly as though your belly is lifting the knee.



Bring your legs together, keeping your feet together, rotate your knee outwards then return and squeeze your knees gently together. Swap to the other side. You can increase this by lifting your heels.



Press your foot down and feel as though you are drawing it back towards your chair without actually moving your foot.



Put your fingertips underneath your bum cheek. Squeeze one glute as though it is trying to squeeze your fingers. Relax as though the muscles are melting over your hand. Then swap. It can be quite difficult initially to just squeeze one at a time so you may need to keep practising it. Then try squeezing both buttocks as though you are trying to lift yourself tall in your chair, hold for a couple of breaths and release.

Spine

Bearing in mind the tips at the start of this guide for keeping your spine safe if you have any spinal conditions, try these to mobilise the spine and help to strengthen it:



Put your hands on your thighs, push them towards the front of your knees as you curve your spine forward, slide the hands back as you lift your chest to the sky – watch your neck here by keeping the back of your neck long and not hanging it backwards.

Slide one hand forward and one back as you turn your chest and head towards the side that you are sliding back. Then swap.



Reach one hand towards the floor in a side stretch. Swap sides. You can increase this and add load by reaching away from your body and then by lifting the arm over your head.



Reach both arms into a T position, keep them straight as though there is a pole connecting them to each other, rotate your spine, keeping your spine long as you look towards the back hand.



Reach both hands forward, draw one elbow back and then extend the arm as though you are drawing a bow and arrow, swap sides.

Open your knees wide, reach the arms down between your legs as you unstack your spine one vertebra at a time, take a breath at the bottom, exhale as you re-stack your spine ending with your shoulders and then your head. If you have POTs, remember to squeeze your legs on the way up and let the muscles go slowly at the top.



Core

Often people in pain or those with hypermobility can have hypertonic abdominal and pelvic muscles as they are often braced against pain or instability. So, we don't want to work the muscles too hard, although gentle activation so your body is well supported is really helpful in reducing pain and making movement easier. The most important thing you can do is to keep breathing. Just by breathing effectively (not using the top of your chest but breathing deeply into your rib cage and belly) you are activating and releasing your core muscles.



Sitting tall, take a breath in, keeping your spine straight, hinge back towards your chair and breath out as you return to the top.

Sitting tall, on an exhale C curve your spine backwards, breath in and then exhale as you return back up. You can reach your hands forward then draw them back as you C curve like you are rowing.



C curve back and draw one arm back as though you are drawing a bow, allow your spine to rotate as you move back and then straighten to the front as you move back to the start.

Push your hands down on your thighs as you lift your body really tall, remove your hands and draw your belly button to your spine just a touch as you try to keep the height.



Put your hands behind your head (if this isn't available to you cross your arms over your chest). Lift your knee towards your opposite elbow and reach your elbow to that knee. Don't force them to touch. Just moving towards each other is plenty. Then swap sides.



With your hands behind your head or crossed over your chest, sit tall, breath in to rotate and exhale to return to the centre.



Further support

If you have found the information in this pack to be useful and would like to access further information, support and resources, please visit: **www.mastcellaction.org**

We'd like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Leanne from Mobilates CIC for sharing her expertise and wisdom in creating this guide.

Your knowledge and dedication to supporting people living with MCAS have made a real difference.

This resource is a testament to your commitment to helping us all move with more confidence, care, and understanding.



This work has been made possible by an award from The Sport England Movement Fund. We extend our heartfelt thanks to The Sport England Movement Fund for their generous support, which has enabled us to deliver this vital work.