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The Magic Circle

by [Jillian Hessel](#)

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Equipment: Use this fun piece of equipment to enhance your sessions and classes.



The Pilates magic circle is a versatile, portable and affordable piece of resistance equipment. Originally designed by Joseph Pilates himself, it can enhance just about any workout routine. Clients love using a new prop, and it's a fun way to refocus wandering attention. Before you introduce the magic circle to your students, be aware of the different types on the market today; they vary in weight, dimensions and resistance.

The original magic circle design consists of two to four bands of spring steel wound into a tight circle about 14 inches in diameter (Mr. Pilates probably used the type of metal bands that hold wooden barrels together). The circle has two wooden handles attached to the outside, bringing the overall diameter to approximately 16 inches. With four bands of steel, the circle weighs 2 pounds and can feel quite heavy to hold at arm's length or to lift overhead. Since the four-band version is also challenging to squeeze, it is recommended for strong male or advanced female clients. This is the priciest circle, costing around \$70, plus shipping fees. The three-band magic circle is considered average and is appropriate for most clients. The two-band version is useful for deconditioned clients or the senior population.

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At the other end of the scale—in terms of weight, resistance and price—are the mass-market magic circles, which retail for around \$30. These circles are made of flexible plastic with a rubberized, padded shell. They generally weigh only three-quarters of a pound and are smaller than the steel circles in both circumference and resistance. There is also a new trend with the handles—manufacturers have added inside handles in addition to the outside handles, increasing the comfort for exercises involving abduction and adduction.

Since the new, lightweight magic circles are relatively inexpensive, you will usually find them in fitness facility settings or group exercise classes. However, these props are a bit “wimpy” for more advanced clients—especially men! It’s extremely important to know your clientele and to choose the appropriate magic circle, as well as the correct exercises, for everyone.

The Magic Circle in Three Dimensions

I love to use a magic circle to visually demonstrate the three-dimensional aspects of the Pilates powerhouse for my clients.

- First, hold the circle vertically, with one pad stacked on top of the other to demonstrate how to “pull up” vertically along the postural plumb line.
- Next, step into the circle and hold one pad in front of your low abdomen and one pad behind your low back to demonstrate the “navel to spine” cue.
- Finally, rotate the circle so the pads are fixed near the head of each hipbone to demonstrate the narrowing of the hips and how to “wrap” the top of your outer thighs.
- Now, visualize all three cues simultaneously, and voilà—you’re using your core muscles and lengthening your spine.

The magic circle can also be used as a prop, without squeezing, in many exercises. For an added challenge, place it between your ankles as you perform the Pilates hundred or roll-over. Place the palms of your hands, fingers extended (without gripping the handles tightly), as you perform a roll-up. Or use it as a prop to maintain proper alignment in spine twist by hugging one pad in toward the sternum as you rotate. Using the circle in this way enhances concentration and precision.

Some enjoy the challenge of squeezing the circle from the outer handles or the task of abducting when the hands or legs are placed inside the ring. Depending on who your clients are, have them use the circle while standing, sitting in a chair (think senior population), sitting upright on the floor, or lying on a mat in the supine, prone and side-lying positions. If you’re creative, you can choreograph an entire sequence with the circle. Vary the dynamics of force and frequency by cuing clients to use short, percussive breathing patterns or long, sustained breaths when applying resistance. Remind students to maintain proper form at all times, and to employ the six principles of Pilates: concentration, control, centering, flowing movement, precision and breath.

Sample Exercises

Here are two of my favorite exercises using the magic circle—one for the upper body and one for the lower body.

Steering wheel. Begin standing or seated tall, and hold the circle by the outside handles centered in front of your sternum. Elbows are bent to the sides, shoulder blades dropped. Exhale completely before you start. Squeeze the circle inward, inhaling through your nose for two short squeezes, and exhaling through your mouth for two squeezes (Ron Fletcher® Percussive Breathing). Perform 10 sets, four squeezes per set. Continue the rhythmic squeezes and breathing, but now extend your elbows straight on set one, and return to the start position on set two, alternating until you have performed another full set of 10.

Pelvic press. Lie supine in neutral spine on the mat. Place the circle either between your upper thighs just above the knees or around the lower thighs with your legs inside the circle (depending on

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whether you choose to adduct or abduct). Inhale to begin. As you exhale, either adduct or abduct the thighs, and peel the spine up to a full bridge. Inhale at the top, maintaining pressure on the circle. Exhale to imprint the spine, one vertebra at a time, back down to the mat. Release pressure on the circle as you inhale, and then repeat 4 more sets. Optional: Hold last pelvic press up and perform 10 sets of percussive breath mini-squeezes or press-outs. Roll down and relax.

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I am a retired ballet dancer. My passion is health & fitness, and helping people get into the best ... [more](#)

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Patricia Welter
On Apr 27, 2013

Thanks for the article bringing attention to a small, yet effective, piece of equipment designed by Joseph Pilates.

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