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The Pilates Beanbag Roll-Up Device

by [Jillian Hessel](#)

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Equipment: This simple, small device can have a profound impact on your Pilates practice and instruction.



The ingenious beanbag roll-up illustrates why so many people say Joseph Pilates was born at least 50 years ahead of his time.

How did Mr. Pilates know 80 years ago that our computers and handheld devices would stress out our fingers, hands, wrists and forearms, or that 21st century weekend warriors would develop a plethora of overuse stress injuries in the upper body?

While we can't answer those questions, we can see that the beanbag (or sandbag) roll-up is a low-tech, inexpensive, portable and original Pilates invention that serves an authentic, practical purpose in today's high-tech, high-stress lifestyles. It's just the thing for clients who complain of weak wrists, carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis in the fingers

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and hands, tennis elbow and frozen shoulders.

In his short book *Your Health*, Joe Pilates says, "The law of natural exercises recognizes 'companion' or reciprocal movements in the normal development of the body." Most of our stress injuries develop from overusing certain sets of muscles while ignoring the reciprocal muscles. The beanbag is a perfect apparatus for everyone, because Mr. Pilates deliberately used his "law of natural exercises" in the finger, hand and wrist actions, which move first in one direction and then in reverse.

The Beanbag Basics

The beanbag is essentially a weighted bag of beans, sand or gravel, attached to a 12- to 18-inch dowel with a long cord. During the roll-up exercise, the bag is held away from the body at shoulder level, and you are required to maintain a very specific, whole-body stance. Fingers, hands, wrists and forearms are strengthened as you unwind and rewind the cord around the dowel.

Sounds simple, right? It is—except that performing the entire sequence, even once, is exhausting. Mr. Pilates was indeed a genius to design such a simple tool for targeting the upper quarter while requiring proper form from the *entire* body as the exercise is executed. One repetition of this simple exercise in perfect form is an excellent whole-body challenge.

Great news: The beanbag is small and portable, so it can go anywhere. The price is right, too: You can purchase a beanbag online for \$60-\$100, or you can even make one yourself.

How to Make a Beanbag

To make a beanbag you will need these items:

- a metal or wooden dowel, about 12–18 inches long and at least 1 inch in diameter
- about 6 feet of lightweight cord or clothesline
- a large sack, and three smaller sacks that fit inside the large one (vinyl works well)
- dried beans, sand or gravel as filler
- a drill to cut a hole in the dowel

Assembly Instructions:

1. Drill a hole at the midpoint of the dowel, and thread one end of the cord through the hole.
2. Make a large knot on one end of the cord so it will not pull through the hole.
3. Fill each of the three smaller sacks with 1 pound of filler (beans, sand or gravel).
4. Place one, two or all three of the small sacks inside the large one, depending on how much weight you want to begin with. Hint: If you have any weakness in the upper quarter, you may wish to begin with 1 pound.
5. Attach the other end of the cord firmly to the neck of your large sack. You are now ready to use your beanbag.

Note: You can shortcut your custom assembly by attaching a 1-, 2- or 3-pound hand or ankle weight to your cord.

Instructions to Perform the Exercise

1. Stand in Pilates stance, heels pressed together, toes pointing slightly outward.
2. "Zip up" the inside of the legs, from ankles to inner thighs and base of the buttocks.
3. Draw the abdominals up and into the spine, and stand up tall with shoulders placed in good vertical alignment over the hips.
4. Roll up the bag so it hangs just below the dowel. Hold the dowel in both hands straight out in front of you at shoulder height. Do not lock your elbows. Drop your shoulders away from your

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- ears.
5. Open the fingers of one hand, and point them toward the ceiling, wrist flexed backward as far as you can. The opposite hand grasps the dowel, fingers wrapped around it, wrist fully extended with knuckles facing the floor.
 6. Slowly unwind the bag toward the floor, alternating the hand grasp between (a) open fingers pointing upward with flexed wrist and (b) grasped hand reaching downward in full wrist extension. Maximize the full flexion and extension of each wrist, and maintain good whole-body form from head to toe. Don't forget to breathe fully in and out, and zip up the navel to the spine as you exhale.
 7. Once your bag reaches the floor, reverse the process and rewind back to the start position. Maintain full wrist flexion and extension on each move, and also maintain the correct body stance. Do not allow the shoulders to sink behind the hips as you begin to tire.

Note: If the exercise is too difficult, reduce your starting weight, and/or limit the length of the cord, so you unwind and rewind over a smaller distance. Concentrate on perfect whole-body form: navel to spine, shoulders dropped down away from ears, and inner legs "zipped up."

To increase the challenge, stand on a stair or a stool so you have to unwind and rewind over a greater distance. Begin with one full repetition, and then gradually add more weight. Work up to three full repetitions over time.

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SIDEBAR: Beanbag Resources

- Designs by Basil (weighted roll-up device), <http://www.pilatesdesignsbybasil.com/addapp.html>
- Gratz Pilates (beanbag roll-up device), <http://www.pilates-gratz.com/accessories/bean-bag-roll-up-device.html>
- Merrithew Health & Fitness™ (beanbag), http://www.merrithew.com/shop/ProductDetail/ST06001_Bean-Bag
- Peak Pilates® (sandbag set), http://peakpilates.com/en/webshop/product/612/sandbag_set
- Tirado Pilates Apparatus™ (weighted roll-up bag), <http://shop.pilatesapparatus.com/product.sc?productId=31&categoryId=3>



Jillian Hessel

IDEA Author/Presenter



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

Reference

Pilates, J. *Your Health*. 1938. Incline Village, NV: Presentation Dynamics (1998 reprint).

[IDEA Pilates Today, Volume 5, Number 2](#)

April 2014

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Plyometric exercises—jumping, bounding, hopping, arm pushing, and catching and throwing weighted objects such as machine balls—are movements that involve rapid eccentric and concentric muscle actions.

Article Comments

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Betsy Walker
April 15, 2014

Thanks Jillian for this great resource! My husband is suffering from carpal tunnel in both hands, is wearing wrist braces day and night, using essential oils and massage but still suffering when he spends too much time at his keyboard. I wonder if even a light weight as you have suggested in your article will flare up his situation more due to the flexing part of the exercise. Your thoughts... Betsy Walker, Core Align pilates



Naomi Aaronson
April 16, 2014

If someone has carpal tunnel syndrome, this refers to inflammation of the median nerve. Unfortunately, keyboarding aggravates this condition which requires rest as much as possible. I would start light stretching during the day in a gravity eliminated position -- palms towards your body and then away in a pain free zone to gently stretch. Using weights when in a flare up might aggravate the condition. Your goal is to decrease inflammation not incite it. In addition, I would recommend seeing a certified hand therapist who can recommend some equipment modifications and ergonomic solutions like voice activated software instead of keyboarding. Naomi Aaronson MA OTR/L CHT

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