

What is Barre?

It's the ballet-inspired workout that burns so good. Here's what to know about this intense yet low-impact workout.

BY KAREN ASP, MA, CPT, VLCE



Barre workouts are more popular than ever, but if you've never taken a class, you might not know what to expect—or what the benefits might be. We're here to help!

What Exactly is Barre?

"It's a form of exercise that combines elements of strength training, dance, Pilates, and yoga to create a unique, graceful, and energetic workout," explains Tanya Becker, cofounder and creator of the Physique 57 Method, a type of barre. The music is upbeat, and the workout typically incorporates small, isometric movements designed to strengthen the entire body. Barre classes typically use a wall-mounted barre for support and balance. Some instructors use additional props like hand weights or playground balls, but the emphasis is usually on resistance provided by your own body weight.

Where Does it Come From?

Barre dates to a method created by German dancer Lotte Berk in the 1950s. It combined ballet barre work, rehabilitative therapy, and some of Berk's own movements and became popular inside the dance community. It caught on in the United States in the 1970s when a student of Berk's opened a barre studio in New York City. Since then, various fitness professionals have adapted barre workouts, leading to a wide range of barre fitness programs.

The Benefits of Barre

Although barre isn't necessarily an aerobic or full cardio workout, it will still benefit your heart health and endurance, depending on the intensity of the class. Because the workouts incorporate stretching exercises, you're likely to increase your flexibility and range of motion. You may also improve your balance, coordination, and bone density as well as sharpen your concentration skills and reduce stress. Probably the most distinctive characteristic of barre is the famous barre "burn." "Because you're targeting your muscles through small, controlled movements as well as larger, more dynamic exercises, you'll feel momentary muscle fatigue," Becker says, adding that you'll also feel muscles you never knew you had. "That burn is a sign your body is changing."

Can Anyone Do It?

Barre is by nature a low-impact activity, meaning there's pretty much zero jumping or joint-impacting moves, which is one reason it can accommodate almost any body, Becker says. Of course, if you have specific cardiovascular or other medical conditions, check with your healthcare provider before starting this workout. And if you have preexisting injuries, are recovering from an injury, or are pregnant, let your instructor know, as you may need to modify some of the moves.

What to Expect in Class

A typical barre class begins with a warm-up of upper-body strengthening exercises (sometimes with weights) and push-ups and planks to raise your heart rate, Becker says. You'll then move to the ballet barre along the wall for thigh and glute-focused exercises. Most classes finish with abdominal work, a cool-down series, and then a final stretch.

Here are a few strategies for your first class:

Expect to be challenged.

No matter your fitness level, barre works you in ways that may be entirely new to you. The more barre you do, though, the more you'll improve your strength, flexibility, and overall fitness.

Wear the right clothes.

You'll be most comfortable in form-fitting workout clothes that let your body move through full ranges of motion, such as leggings or capris with a tank top or sports bra. Socks with rubberized grips on the soles will give you more traction on the floor and enhance your stability during exercises.

Embrace the burn.

As you've heard, your muscles will burn and even shake a little. That's good! "This means you've hit that fatigue point where your muscles change," Becker says. That said, listen to your body if working a muscle hard turns into true discomfort or pain, modify the movement or take a break. ■