PAPRIKA PILATES

Mat Pilates Starter Guide

Precision with a pinch of heat.

A beginner's companion to your first weeks on the mat — by Eszter, founder of Paprika Pilates.

WELCOME

A note from Eszter

When a new client rolls out their mat for the very first time, I tell them the same thing I want to tell you now: you already have everything you need. Pilates isn't a club you have to be strong or bendy to join. It is a way of paying close, almost stubborn attention to how you move — and letting that attention quietly change you.

I called my studio Paprika because good movement, like good cooking, is precision with a pinch of heat. The precision is the careful placement: a rib that softens, a pelvis that stays level, a breath that reaches the right place. The heat is the warmth and the effort — the bit that makes you feel alive in your own body again. You will find both in the pages that follow.

This guide is the take-home companion to a first lesson. It walks you through how to breathe and stand the Pilates way, then gives you ten gentle mat exercises that build real, usable strength from the centre out. None of it is flashy. All of it works, if you show up for it a couple of times a week and stay curious about the details.

Go slowly. Be kind to yourself. Treat every repetition as a small experiment rather than a test you can fail. And when you are ready for more — a pair of eyes on your form, a class to keep you honest, or simply a friendly chat about where to begin — you will find a warm welcome at the end of this guide.

I am so glad you are here. Let's begin.

— Eszter

GETTING READY

Before you begin

What you need

Very little, and that is the point. A mat or any padded, non-slip surface saves your spine from a hard floor. Clear a space about a body-length in each direction so you can stretch your arms and legs without meeting a wall or a coffee table. Wear clothes you can move and breathe in, and work in bare feet or grippy socks so you can feel the floor. Keep a small folded towel or cushion and some water within reach — nothing else is required.

When to practise

Whenever you can move without rushing. Mornings wake the body up; evenings unwind it. Avoid practising straight after a big meal, and give yourself fifteen to twenty unhurried minutes rather than a punishing hour. Consistency beats intensity every single time: a short, focused session you actually do is worth far more than a long one you dread. Quality of attention is the whole game.

PLEASE READ FIRST — YOUR SAFETY

- This guide is general information, not medical advice, and it cannot account for your individual body or history.
- Please consult a qualified health professional before starting if you are pregnant or recently postnatal, recovering from injury or surgery, or managing any health condition.
- Move within a comfortable, pain-free range. Muscular effort and a gentle stretch are normal; sharp, sudden or joint pain is not. If you feel sharp pain, stop immediately and rest.
- Breathe throughout — never hold your breath to push through a movement — and skip or soften any exercise that does not feel right for you today.

FOUNDATIONS

Breathing & posture fundamentals

Before the exercises, spend a few minutes here. These three ideas are the quiet engine behind everything in the sequence — get them under your skin and every movement becomes easier, safer and far more effective.

Lateral, ribcage breathing

In Pilates we breathe wide rather than high. Inhale through the nose and send the air into the sides and back of your ribcage, as if you were filling a belt around your lower ribs — feel them widen out to the sides. Exhale through softly pursed lips and let the ribs knit gently together and down, drawing the deep abdominals in like a corset tightening. This keeps the core switched on while you move and stops you bracing or holding your breath.

> IN PRACTICE rest your hands on the sides of your ribs and feel them push out into your palms on the inhale, then melt down on the exhale. Keep the shoulders quiet and the belly soft — the movement is in the ribs, not the chest or the neck.

Neutral spine and pelvis

Your spine has natural curves, and Pilates respects them. Lying on your back with knees bent, let the pelvis settle so it is level — the two front hip bones and the pubic bone sitting in the same flat plane, with a small, natural gap under your lower back. This is neutral. Sometimes we deliberately leave neutral and gently flatten the back to the mat (an 'imprint') for support; both are useful, and learning to find the difference is one of the first real skills you will build.

> IN PRACTICE rock the pelvis to its extremes — tucking then arching — then settle halfway between, where the hip bones are level and the lower back is long but not pressed flat. That midpoint is home.

Head, shoulder and rib alignment

Think of three stacked blocks: head over ribcage over pelvis. Let the shoulder blades rest wide and flat on your back and slide gently down, away from your ears, rather than rounding forward or hunching up. Keep the back of the neck long, the chin neither jammed down nor poking up. Let the front ribs stay knitted down rather than flaring open toward the ceiling. Aligned like this, your body works as one connected unit instead of a set of struggling parts.

> IN PRACTICE imagine a thread lifting the crown of your head while your shoulder blades and tailbone gently anchor — long in two directions at once.

THE PRACTICE

The beginner mat sequence

Here are ten foundational exercises, in the order I would teach them. Each one builds on the last, warming the body, waking the centre, and finishing with a calm return to standing. Read each page once before you try it, then keep the guide nearby. Work slowly — every repetition is an experiment in precision, not a race.

How to read each exercise

Setup	where to start — your position before the first move.
Movement	the steps themselves, in order, done slowly and with control.
Breath	when to inhale and exhale; let the breath lead the movement.
Reps	how many, or how long — always stop sooner if your form fades.
Key cue	the one thought to hold on to while you move.
Common mistake	the slip to watch for, so you can self-correct.
Make it easier	a gentler option for your first weeks.

Throughout, return to the fundamentals: breathe wide into the ribs, keep your alignment honest, and move within a pain-free range. If anything feels sharp, stop and rest.

01

EXERCISE 01 OF 10

Breathing warm-up in neutral

SETUP	Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat and hip-width apart, arms long by your sides. Let the pelvis settle into neutral with its small natural gap under the lower back, and let the whole body grow heavy into the mat.
MOVEMENT	1. Inhale through the nose and breathe wide into the sides and back of your ribcage, feeling the ribs expand outward. 2. Exhale slowly through softly pursed lips, letting the ribs knit down and the deep abdominals draw gently in. 3. Keep the shoulders, jaw and belly soft; repeat with an even, unhurried rhythm.
BREATH	Inhale to a count of three; exhale to a count of four.
REPS	8–10 slow breaths.

KEY CUE

Breathe into the back and sides of the ribs, not up into the shoulders.

COMMON MISTAKE

Lifting the chest and arching the lower back on the inhale.

MAKE IT EASIER

Rest one hand on your ribs and one on your belly so you can feel the ribs do the work while the belly stays quiet.

02

EXERCISE 02 OF 10

Pelvic tilts (pelvic clock)

SETUP	Stay on your back, knees bent, feet hip-width, arms relaxed by your sides. Picture a clock face resting on your lower belly: navel is twelve, pubic bone is six.
MOVEMENT	1. Exhale and gently tilt the pelvis toward twelve, letting the lower back ease flat into the mat (a small imprint). 2. Inhale and roll back through neutral toward six, allowing a soft natural arch. 3. Continue rocking smoothly between the numbers, exploring the whole small circle of the clock.
BREATH	Exhale to tilt and flatten; inhale to return.
REPS	8–10 slow tilts.

KEY CUE

Move only the pelvis — keep the ribs and chest completely quiet.

COMMON MISTAKE

Pushing through the feet or gripping the buttocks to force the tilt.

MAKE IT EASIER

Shrink the range right down — even a few millimetres of rocking teaches the movement.

03

EXERCISE 03 OF 10

Pelvic curl (shoulder bridge)

SETUP	On your back, knees bent, feet hip-width and parallel, arms long by your sides with palms down. Begin in neutral.
MOVEMENT	1. Exhale, tilt the pelvis to imprint, then peel the spine off the mat one vertebra at a time until you rest on your shoulder blades in a long bridge. 2. Inhale at the top, keeping the front ribs soft and the knees in line with the hips. 3. Exhale and roll back down slowly, melting the spine bone by bone, tailbone landing last.
BREATH	Exhale to roll up; inhale at the top; exhale to roll down.
REPS	6–8 controlled curls.

KEY CUE

Articulate bone by bone, like slowly peeling tape off the floor.

COMMON MISTAKE

Hiking the hips too high and arching the lower back at the top.

MAKE IT EASIER

Lift only to a low bridge — hips a few inches off the mat — and grow the range as it feels easy.

04

EXERCISE 04 OF 10

Chest lift (abdominal prep)

SETUP	On your back, knees bent, feet hip-width. Rest your hands lightly behind your head with the elbows wide and in your side vision. Keep the pelvis in neutral.
MOVEMENT	1. Inhale to prepare and lengthen the back of the neck. 2. Exhale, nod the chin a little, and curl the head, neck and tips of the shoulder blades off the mat, leading from the breastbone. 3. Inhale to hold for a moment, then exhale and lower slowly with control.
BREATH	Exhale to curl up; inhale to hold; exhale to lower.
REPS	6–10 lifts.

KEY CUE

Curl from the breastbone with eyes toward your thighs; let the deep abdominals draw down, not bulge up.

COMMON MISTAKE

Yanking the head forward with the hands so the chin jams into the chest.

MAKE IT EASIER

Keep the head supported on a folded towel and simply practise the exhale and the abdominal draw-in, lifting only a little.

05

EXERCISE 05 OF 10

Table-top toe taps

SETUP	On your back in neutral, float the legs up one at a time to table-top: knees stacked over hips, shins parallel to the floor, knees bent to a right angle.
MOVEMENT	1. Exhale and lower one foot to lightly tap the mat, keeping the knee bent and the pelvis still. 2. Inhale and return the leg to table-top. 3. Alternate sides slowly, as if dipping a toe into water — no rushing, no swinging.
BREATH	Exhale to tap down; inhale to return.
REPS	8–10 taps on each side, alternating.

KEY CUE

Keep the pelvis level and the lower back quiet — the deep core does the holding.

COMMON MISTAKE

Letting the lower back pop up off the mat as the foot lowers.

MAKE IT EASIER

Keep one foot on the floor and move only one leg at a time, or simply tap a shorter distance.

06

EXERCISE 06 OF 10

Single-leg stretch (head-down option)

SETUP	On your back, draw one knee gently toward your chest and extend the other leg long, angled up toward the ceiling rather than low to the floor. Keep your head resting down on the mat.
MOVEMENT	1. Exhale and switch legs smoothly, drawing the opposite knee in as the other leg reaches away. 2. Keep the torso still and the pelvis quiet as the legs change. 3. Move at a steady, controlled pace, letting the breath set the rhythm.
BREATH	Exhale with each leg switch, breathing steadily throughout.
REPS	6–8 switches on each side.

KEY CUE

Anchor the centre — only the legs move; the spine and pelvis stay calm.

COMMON MISTAKE

Letting the lower back arch as the leg extends, or reaching the leg too low.

MAKE IT EASIER

Keep the head down and aim the extending leg higher, toward the ceiling, to protect the lower back.

07

EXERCISE 07 OF 10

Spine stretch forward

SETUP	Sit up tall, legs extended a little wider than your hips, feet softly flexed. Reach your arms forward at shoulder height. If the hamstrings feel tight, bend the knees and sit on a folded towel.
MOVEMENT	1. Inhale and grow tall through the crown of the head, lifting out of the hips. 2. Exhale, drop the chin and round forward one vertebra at a time, reaching your hands past your toes into a deep C-curve. 3. Inhale at the bottom, then exhale and restack the spine to tall, lowest vertebra to highest, head last.
BREATH	Inhale to sit tall; exhale to round forward.
REPS	5–6 slow stretches.

KEY CUE

Articulate into a C-curve — imagine lifting up and over a big beach ball.

COMMON MISTAKE

Hinging from the hips with a flat back instead of rounding the spine.

MAKE IT EASIER

Sit on a folded cushion and bend the knees generously so you can sit and round without strain.

08

EXERCISE 08 OF 10

Side-lying top-leg lift series

SETUP	Lie on one side in one long line, head resting on your lower arm. Bring both legs slightly forward of your hips for a stable base, top hand pressing lightly on the mat in front of your chest.
MOVEMENT	1. Exhale and lift the top leg to about hip height, keeping the foot level and the leg long. 2. Inhale and lower it slowly with control, without letting it drop. 3. Make small, precise lifts; finish the set, then roll over and repeat on the other side.
BREATH	Exhale to lift; inhale to lower.
REPS	8–10 lifts on each side.

KEY CUE

Lengthen the leg long out of the hip and keep the waist gently lifted off the mat.

COMMON MISTAKE

Rolling the hips backward or hiking the top hip up toward the ribs.

MAKE IT EASIER

Bend the bottom knee for a wider, steadier base and lower the height of the lift.

09

EXERCISE 09 OF 10

Swan prep (gentle back extension)

SETUP	Lie face down, forehead resting on the mat, legs hip-width and relaxed. Place your hands under your shoulders with the elbows close to your sides.
MOVEMENT	1. Inhale, draw the shoulder blades down your back and lengthen the crown of the head forward. 2. Continue the inhale to float the breastbone into a small, long back extension, keeping the back of the neck long. 3. Exhale and lower slowly back to the mat, growing longer as you come down.
BREATH	Inhale to lengthen and lift; exhale to lower.
REPS	5–6 gentle lifts.

KEY CUE

Lead with the breastbone and length, keeping the abdominals lightly lifted — not with the lower back.

COMMON MISTAKE

Cranking the head back and crunching into the lower back to lift higher.

MAKE IT EASIER

Rest on your forearms in a low sphinx and lift only the breastbone a small amount.

10

EXERCISE 10 OF 10

Rest position & roll-up to standing

SETUP	Come onto all fours, then press your hips back toward your heels into a rest position: arms reaching forward, forehead toward the mat, back softly rounded.
MOVEMENT	1. Stay in the rest position and breathe wide into your back ribs for several slow breaths, letting everything release. 2. Walk your hands in and rise to stand with knees soft and the spine rounded forward. 3. Exhale and roll up to standing one vertebra at a time, stacking the spine from the base upward — your head floats up last.
BREATH	Slow nasal breaths in the rest; exhale to begin the roll-up.
REPS	Hold the rest for 4–6 breaths; roll up once, slowly.

KEY CUE

Let the back ribs widen with each breath, then stack the spine bone by bone on the way up.

COMMON MISTAKE

Standing up too fast and leading with the head instead of stacking the spine.

MAKE IT EASIER

Slide your hands up your thighs for support and come up in easy stages, pausing if you feel light-headed.

YOUR ROUTINE

Putting it together

Once the individual exercises feel familiar, flow through them as one short session. Run in this order, it takes roughly fifteen to twenty unhurried minutes and moves the body sensibly: warm, then strong, then open, then calm.

1	**Breathing warm-up in neutral**	1–2 minutes to arrive and connect to the breath.
2	**Pelvic tilts (pelvic clock)**	Mobilise and wake the lower spine.
3	**Pelvic curl (shoulder bridge)**	Articulate the spine; switch on the back of the body.
4	**Chest lift (abdominal prep)**	Find the deep front core.
5	**Table-top toe taps**	Challenge core control with moving legs.
6	**Single-leg stretch**	Coordinate breath, legs and a steady centre.
7	**Spine stretch forward**	Lengthen the spine and the backs of the legs.
8	**Side-lying top-leg lift series**	Strengthen the hips and waist (both sides).
9	**Swan prep**	Open the front body with a gentle extension.
10	**Rest position & roll-up**	Release, then return calmly to standing.

A gentle weekly rhythm

Aim for two or three sessions a week with rest days in between — this is plenty to feel real change within a month. Keep returning to the breathing and posture fundamentals; they are not a warm-up to rush past but the heart of the method. As the ten exercises become easy and honest, add a repetition or two, or hold the harder moments a beat longer. Let progress be slow and steady. The body rewards the patient.

WHAT NEXT

Where to go from here

When you are ready for more than a guide can give — a pair of expert eyes, the momentum of a class, or simply a friendly steer on where to begin — here is how I can help. There are four ways to work with me at Paprika Pilates:

1:1 Session

Private, fully personalised attention in the studio or online, with everything tailored to your body and your goals.

Online Classes

Small, friendly live classes you can join from your own front room — structure and good company, wherever you are.

Corporate Wellness

Pilates brought to your workplace, designed around your team to undo desk-bound days and build healthy habits.

Discovery Call

A free, twenty-minute, no-commitment chat to talk through where you are and find the right starting point — the easiest first step of all.

If you take only one thing from this guide, let it be this: book the free Discovery Call. There is no pressure and no cost — just twenty friendly minutes to ask your questions and plan a sensible path forward.

And if you simply like to read and learn at your own pace, visit The Paprika Journal for more notes on Mat Pilates, mobility and moving well through an ordinary day.

However you choose to continue — keep practising, keep paying attention, and enjoy it.

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