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Chapter **1**

Stepping Up to the Barre: A Barre Primer

This chapter gives you the lowdown on what Barre actually is — where it comes from, what it looks like in action, and why it works. You discover how small, mindful ballet-inspired movements deliver big results, no prima ballerina background (or wall-mounted barre) required.

What Is a Barre Workout?

Barre is a ballet-inspired workout that’s low-impact but seriously high-intensity. It blends the precision of Pilates, the flow of yoga, and the focused discipline of professional dance training into one workout that builds strength, stamina, and flexibility. Don’t let the small movements fool you — Barre challenges deep stabilizing muscles you didn’t even know you had. It improves your posture, tones your entire body, and sharpens your mind-body connection, all without a single jump or jarring impact. In this book, you will learn the classic moves, follow warm-up and full-workout sequences, and quickly feel confident of the benefits of this iconic (and truly effective) fitness method.



Barre is more than a class or workout; it's movement that strengthens you physically and mentally. It shows you what you are capable of and leaves you feeling empowered, energized, and motivated to take on life with a new level of intention.

Now, the barre itself — the wall-fixed, stationary handrail used for warmups in ballet-training and dance studios around the world — is where the name of this workout derives. But here's the thing: Barre is most definitely not just for dancers. And you most definitely don't need a wall-fixed barre to do it (more on that in a moment).

Barre may be performed in a studio or at home on an exercise mat, barefoot or in grip socks, and occasionally with light hand weights, resistance bands, or a Barre or Pilates ball. Workouts consist of a warm-up, then a series of targeted and challenging exercises that focus on the upper body and arms, the core, abductors, thighs, legs, and feet, and a delicious cooldown at the end to promote flexibility and mobility. With consistency, you'll achieve lean muscle tone, incredible stamina and flexibility, and feel nothing short of amazing.

Ballet-inspired exercise

As Barre borrows from the art of ballet training via Pilates and yoga, you will learn classic ballet moves like pliés, arabesque, and battements (don't worry if this all sounds French to you; we cover how to do all these moves in Chapter 5), and improve your endurance using your own bodyweight via repetitions to challenge the body in targeted ways.

A series of small moves with big results

Many of my clients who are brand-new to Barre workouts are surprised by how quickly they see — and feel — the results. How can such small moves, seemingly simple techniques, and graceful positions deliver toned limbs, a stronger core, improved flexibility, and make their muscles shake like they're bench-pressing 100 pounds? How can such a low-impact workout be so deeply effective at burning fat? And why are these hand weights so light?

“Barre . . . has a reputation for being deceptively hard — all those tiny movements can add up to a rigorous workout,” noted *The New York Times* in 2025.

The power of Barre is that, even though the moves can seem small and the weights are light, it's truly a full-body workout. Through a series of targeted and compound movements, a Barre workout focuses on both individual muscles and muscle groups throughout the body. Barre also gives special focus to those smaller muscles that might not otherwise get activated, which tends to promote a more

toned, stronger physique. Targeting those muscles — through isometric holds, changing positions, lots of repetitions, sometimes with light weights, a ball, or resistance bands — means those small moves deliver big results.

There is a reason dancers' bodies are so startlingly strong relative to their body mass, and Barre workouts owe much to this much-loved tradition.

Isometric holds

Isometric exercises are static holds in specific positions for a set period. Think wall sits, glute bridges, and planks; in Barre workouts, this is seen in various exercises where we hold the position before or after the movement. These holds activate muscles or muscle groups without moving. Where a biceps curl lengthens (eccentric contraction) and shortens (concentric contraction) your biceps, an isometric exercise is a completely still, static contraction. A Barre workout combines both movement and still moments of isometric exercise to build strength and control.

A QUICK HISTORY OF BARRE

We can thank dance icon Lotte Berk (1913–2003), drawing on a century of classical ballet training and modern expressionist technique, for starting what we now know as Barre. German-born and trained, Lotte's celebrated career found a home in London, England, when she and her husband fled in 1938 on the eve of the Second World War. In 1959, she devised a fitness system for women — a series of dance-based exercises — that soon became the fitness craze of London in the Swinging Sixties. From her basement studio in the city's theater district, Lotte's rumored clientele included celebrities like supermodel Yasmin Le Bon, Joan Collins, and Barbra Streisand. "While Vidal Sassoon did the hair and Mary Quant made the clothes, Lotte Berk took care of the body," wrote *The Times* in 2003.

Like the very best ideas, Lotte's approach was so much to do with perspective. She looked at ballet and dance training in a new way and turned what had been a specialized, elite pursuit into something new and exciting — and open to everyone.

After its success in London, the Lotte Berk Method studio opened in New York City in 1971, and later, other fitness thought-leaders were inspired to create their own barre- and ballet-based classes.

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With my own background as a professional dancer, Pilates instructor, and private fitness coach, and after training hundreds and hundreds of wonderful clients, I think of Barre as the perfect workout. I created the Xtend Method in 2008, opened studios internationally, pivoted to digital classes, and now there's a whole Xtend community of women taking part in online classes, group discussions, and supporting each other. They're the best Barre-friends ever!

Understanding the Fundamentals

Before you jump into your first pli , it helps to understand the core principles that make Barre so effective. From alignment and isometric holds to dealing with the famous “Barre shake,” this section breaks down the aims and building blocks of every great Barre workout.



TIP

Think of a full Barre workout as incorporating four pillars, or the four S's: Strength, Stamina, Stretch, and Stability.

Strength

You'll be challenging and building strength through resistance, using your body-weight (or occasionally light weights or resistance bands) in moves like Parallel Pli s, Fold-Overs, and C-Curve Abs. (I cover how to do the perfect C-Curve in Chapter 9.) As with all strength-building, your strength will grow when combined with a healthful diet and enough protein (and enough calories in general), good hydration, and skillful sleep.

Stamina

You'll be challenging and improving your stamina, and you'll be able to measure this in your ability to hold positions for longer and with better form, increasing the number of repetitions you're able to do before fatigue, and in the ability and desire to take on longer and more intense workouts. It's a subtle power that grows and is useful in every area of your life.

Stretch

Much like yoga and Pilates, Barre workouts contain a stretch component — it's baked into many of the exercises — that supports general mobility, flexibility, and

muscle health, and helps prevent muscle tightness (which, if ignored, can cause injury). Chapter 11 covers active stretching exercises.

Stability

Your ability to maintain a stable center — particularly in your core and pelvis — will start to improve, as a complex network of muscles learn to activate instinctively. Exercises like second cardio, battements, and passé presses, where you move your limbs away from your core, challenge your ability to maintain stability — and it's this challenge that truly improves it. Outside your Barre workouts, your overall balance will improve, which is especially important as we age.

Why You Don't Need a Wall-Mounted Barre

In traditional ballet training, the barre is there for occasional support, and dancers are encouraged to move as if it's not there at all; their fingers brush or tap the barre rather than grip it like their life depends on it!



REMEMBER

In-studio classes may make clever use of a wall-fixed barre, but many don't, and the exercises in this book do not require one at all.



TIP

If you do need a little extra help with balance, consider an exercise stick (sometimes called a yoga stick or stretching stick). These tools are often made of wood and sometimes have a grip on one end. Or you can simply use the back of your couch, a barstool, or any sturdy surface (around hip height) to support your movement.

You Don't Have to Be a Dancer — In Fact, Far from It

I trained as a dancer throughout my childhood and teen years and performed professionally into my mid-20s, and let me tell you: We were athletes! Don't be fooled by the tutus and glitter — I trained at least five days a week, took part in endless competitions; it was grueling (and I loved every minute of it). But so much of the art of dance is born from a series of classic moves, performed gracefully with strength and full-out intention. Those moves, performed again and again, improve fitness and flexibility, stamina and strength, and it soon became clear to me that dance-inspired workouts would gift the same strong and confident physique to just about anyone.

WHAT THE HECK IS THE BARRE SHAKE?

Building muscle endurance through small, focused movement is a Barre specialty, but some movements, especially if you're new to them, can cause your muscles to tremble, known as the "Barre shake."

"As muscle fibers become fatigued during exercise, your body needs to stimulate more muscle fibers, which require more motor neurons to fire," says Matthew Accetta, an exercise physiologist at the Hospital for Special Surgery, on wellness site *Well+Good*. "The impulses that travel through the nervous system and to the neuromuscular junctions to carry out activity are what cause the muscles to twitch and shake."

When performing a move correctly, shaking is probably a sign you're close to reaching your limit, but in Barre, you'll soon be changing position, allowing fatigued muscles to recover. So, should you always just push through it? No. But should you modify your stance — like reducing your range of motion a little in a plié? Yes!

Barre is open to all fitness levels and abilities, from people in the process of building or rebuilding their confidence, losing weight, overcoming illness, or entering a new phase of life, from first timers right through to amateur and elite athletes, and, yes, dancers. This is something I truly love about Barre: It really is for everyone! You can take it slow and steady, or — like in my own classes — enjoy a high tempo, dynamic workout knowing both routes mix cardio, strength, endurance, and flexibility.

Practicing Barre for a Lifetime

As Barre draws so generously from ballet, a dance practice that is centuries old, it has incredible longevity. From strengthening the mind-body connection to maintaining mobility and even relieving stress, Barre can truly be in your life for years to come.

Mind-body movement

Mind-body movement might sound a little crystals-and-chakras, but it's a form of exercise that is based in neurology. It pays to familiarize yourself with your body, muscles, and joints, and develop the ability to visualize how they all work together.

Focusing — that is, thinking about — how your body moves and turning on different muscles and muscle groups, truly helps with control. For example, if we mindlessly lift our arms, we aren't truly focusing on *how* we are engaging our muscles to create a certain movement. When mindfully thinking through each movement as we do it, we can often get more bang for our buck out of every rep. Make the most of your efforts by truly focusing your mind on engaging those muscles to your fullest capacity.

Sustainable strength and mobility

Building strength and mobility in a sustainable way comes from consistency, and consistency comes from showing up, harnessing the motivation to roll out your exercise mat, performing your moves, and entering your personal challenge zone (more on that in Chapter 5). As motivation can sometimes be a little elusive, to help, workouts should be easy to set up, fun to do, challenging, and effective. Luckily, Barre is all these things!

Barre's simple setup — just an exercise mat, light weights, resistance bands, exercise ball — challenging moves, and quickly gained results, make staying motivated easy. And while just one Barre workout will leave you feeling strong, sweaty, and at least six feet tall, consistency will create a sustainable improvement in strength and mobility. To read more about the equipment you need, as well as how to stay motivated, check out Chapter 4.

Low impact, high intensity

With its mindful, fluid movements, Barre's naturally low-impact approach is incredibly gentle on joints and tendons, making it the perfect workout for those with arthritis and joint issues. While high-impact exercise has its benefits, low-impact workouts like Barre are generally safer, with a low chance of injury (and they're generally apartment-friendly, too).

But the true power of Barre is that, while it is low-impact, it is also high-intensity and aerobic, steadily activating your cardiovascular system, your muscles, and your whole body. You'll feel challenged and end up with an incredible sense of accomplishment — and who doesn't want that?

Natural stress reliever

All exercise is a stress reliever, helping regulate stress hormones and promote calm and a positive sense of self, but — and I might be biased here — there is something special about Barre. The mental component, learning and maintaining

new moves, being hyper-aware of your physicality, growing stronger and more flexible, truly focuses and calms the mind. Barre takes you “out of your head” and into your body. What’s more, in 2025, a small study by researchers at Pusan National University in Korea found that senior women who combined regular Barre workouts with walking experienced positive physiological effects: Stress and depression were lowered, and even the immune system got a boost.

Adding Modifications and Progressions

Each exercise in Part 2 of this book details both modifications to help you get the most out of each move and progressions to push yourself a little further. Both are equally smart options. While Barre is open to everyone — no matter your fitness level or physical abilities — not every aspect of every move will be achievable for everyone all the time. (I am a huge fan of modifying during my personal workouts.)

If you’re recovering from an injury or have mobility issues (the most common challenges are knees, the lower back, and the neck and shoulders), the smart move is to modify — just make the move a little easier. Paying attention to your body, knowing your own limits, and being honest with yourself when you could push just a little further are integral.

Combining Barre with Other Forms of Exercise

Barre is a truly effective cross-training exercise, perfect for high-impact sports fans, from runners to weight trainers, to help further condition their physiques. Combining exercise types like this and allowing for some contrast in your own fitness activities really pays off. The American Heart Association (AHA) agrees. Drawing on the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the AHA recommends 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity per week, or — better still — a combination of both. Add moderate- to high-intensity muscle-strengthening activity (such as resistance or weights) to at least two days per week, and you’re winning! For even more ways to supercharge your Barre workout, see Chapter 16.