

Finishing touch

Move over Pilates – Finland’s Marja Putkisto has developed an ingenious stretching technique that can give you a supple, youthful body at any age, says Newby Hands

You’ve probably never heard of Method Putkisto. Your gym won’t offer classes in it, and your local shop won’t sell a video of it. It doesn’t have any celebrity devotees and, unlike Christy Turlington who has a range of yoga clothing, Nuala – you can’t buy Putkisto workout wear.

Or, at least, not yet. Because Method Putkisto is one of the most sensible, effective and body-changing (if not also potentially life- and health-changing) methods of exercise I have tried. This precise and specific method has been quietly developed over the past 10 years by Marja Putkisto, a Finn who now lives in London, where she teaches at her studio. The method arose from her knowledge of the body and how it works, which she acquired while teaching dance, movement and Pilates.

‘I was born with a hip problem, which was corrected by a brace when I was a baby,’ she explains. ‘Although I had no memory of this, as I got older I found that no matter how fit I was, certain movements were almost impossible.’ This, coupled with other ‘blind spots’ she discovered in her body during dance and voice classes, lead to Marja looking at ways to make her own healthier and fully functional.

Method Putkisto is essentially a method of stretching (with a strong basis in the principles of pilates), but it cannot be compared to the post-work-out stretches with which most of us are familiar. That would be like comparing a marathon runner to someone doing a two-mile fun run. Traditional stretches work on the body’s large muscles, and are done to extend them following the contracting that occurs during a ‘normal’ work-out. But Marja’s method focuses on the small but integral muscles that, when stretched, can help to realign and, ultimately, reshape the body.

‘As we build up areas of tension,’ she explains, ‘some muscles contract, causing others to lengthen, which then puts the body out of kilter. Our posture gets out of line and that, in turn, affects our overall wellbeing, inhibiting our breathing, circulation, digestion and so on.’ Gently but effectively, her method puts the body back in alignment. ‘The whole system can operate with greater efficiency and energy,’ she says.

Unlike any other of exercise I know, you can witness the body-changing effects in minutes, and the real beauty of this method is that, once you’ve been taught the stretches, you can easily do them at home. ‘Initially, these changes are not long-term,’ says Marja, ‘but if they’re done daily, within two or three weeks they become permanent.’ Often, before going out, Marja will do certain stretches to tone her arms and realign her back and shoulders. ‘If I am wearing something like a halterneck, it makes such a difference,’ she says.

Our culture is obsessed with aging and the methods of stopping it, but Marja points out that paying to have the face of a 35-year-old when you still have the stiff and unsupple body of a 55-year-old isn’t convincing. ‘As we age, the upper body sinks down, the waist thickens as the ribcage drops, the shoulders go forward, and we move in a very different way from a child or a teenager,’ she says. “But if you counter these natural effects of ageing, you can keep the body young and looking youthful.” She even teaches Method Putkisto for the face, to counteract double chins and jowly jawlines; if her own fortysomething face is anything to go by, it works.

In a matter of minutes, Marja demonstrates how just one stretch (to release the short muscle inside the front of the shoulder) immediately repositions the upper body. This is the back saving stretch for anyone who spends hours hunched over a computer keyboard.

'The body holds onto bad habits of sitting and walking, and our muscles lose their full range of movement,' she says. 'Shortened hamstrings pull the buttocks down, which makes the stomach push outwards, and so on.' While conventional exercise concentrates on tightening and shortening muscles, as Pilates does, Method Putkisto works on opening and lengthening key muscles, which in turn helps to open and 'lengthen' the body. After a two-day workshop with Marja, I found that several long-term niggling aches had disappeared.

Marja even claims that by adjusting the pelvis – which in turn affects the muscles, tissue and circulation in the hips and thighs – cellulite can virtually disappear. I have yet to reach this stage, but I do know that after a couple of weeks, the strange nodules on the back of my super-tight hamstrings (like *petit pois* under the skin) have disappeared.

Doing the stretches is extremely calming, as focused breathing and visualisation are vital if you are to achieve a full stretch. 'In a deep stretch, the body's natural defence mechanism creates a "biting" pain as the muscle tries to contract, but you go through it by breathing to relax the muscle,' explains Marja. By inhaling deeply ('Don't strain – imagine you are inhaling something that smells wonderful'), exhaling slowly, then stretching in the pause before inhaling again, the body seems to open and move with you, rather than fight against you.

The body's own weight is used to extend the stretch, and this, coupled with the breathing technique and visualisation ('Focus on the muscle you are working; almost mentally go into it to relax it') provides a new awareness of the body. Although there are specific methods for each stretch, Marja encourages 'wiggling around a little' until you feel your precise area of tightness. Some areas release easily, others are painful and, occasionally, it is agony, but the feeling afterwards is fantastic – as though someone has taken you apart and then put everything back where it should be.

Although Method Putkisto works as an exercise method in its own right, to reshape an out-of shape body, it also complements a variety of other sports by opening up the body's full range of muscle movement. Over the past decade, Marja has taught polo players, footballers, opera singers and musicians. 'It's also a great exercise for golfers, as it can transform the swing when work is done that concentrates on releasing the back.' She also insists that there is no age or fitness barrier – one of her private clients is in his early eighties. 'There is no one who can't do it, no hopeless cases: just people that give up.'