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Bar Method seeks the dancer's body without the dance

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NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) - Women who crave muscle tone but fear bulging biceps are flocking to The Bar Method, a body-sculpting exercise system that purports to whittle dancer-type forms from non-dancing bodies.

Enthusiasts say the workout, which engages a ballet bar and draws movements from isometrics, dance conditioning and interval training, targets the most shape-changing muscles.

"You get this long, lean dancer's body," Dannah Lewis, director of marketing and communications for The Bar Method said from the company's San Francisco headquarters.

"It's really specific, a very defined look. Near the office, I can pick all our clients out of a crowd."

Elongated muscles, narrow thighs, a lifted seat, defined hamstrings and flat abdominals are among the most noticeable features of The Bar Method body, according to the company.

Lewis, a devotee for two years, adds improved posture, reduced body fat, and back pain relief.

The Bar Method is based on the technique of Lotte Berk, a German-born dancer who fled to London in the 1930's. After injuring her back, she combined ballet bar routines with rehabilitative therapy and the Lotte Berk Method exercise system was born.

Berk disciple Burr Leonard tweaked the method in the 1990s, revising the exercises with the help of a physical therapist and streamlining the pacing of classes.

From music to teacher training, Leonard, now a very toned 63, oversees every aspect of the 37 trademarked and branded Bar Method studios currently operating coast-to-coast in the United States.

"All classes are all set up the same way," Lewis explained.

One hour-long session can cost as much as \$35. And don't assume you can just drop in. Attendance is strictly limited, Lewis said, so teachers can demonstrate, count and correct.

"The muscle definition is so much more than in yoga, but it's a feminine definition, not like body building," said Lewis.

So it's no surprise that 95 percent of the Bar Method devotees are women, although men are encouraged to attend. Lewis said while younger women are in the majority, seniors find the mix of isometrics and interval training challenging but enjoyable.

"A lot of the movements are one inch-one inch this way and then that way," she said. "You'd be amazed at what moving one inch correctly can do for your body."

Jessica Matthews of the American Council on Exercise agrees that isometric movements, which activate the smaller stabilizer muscles, can improve posture and range of motion.

"They do have a lot of focus on core strength," she said of The Bar Method technique. "A class like this has great benefits, especially for people with lower back issues."

As an exercise physiologist, Matthews praises The Bar Method as an effective way for the gym-averse to strengthen muscles without lifting weights.

"Much of the workout is similar to other body weight exercises like Pilates and yoga," she said. "It's a nice middle ground for women who want to become toned but don't want to be bulky."

But of shape-changing claims, she is wrier.

"We hear a lot about the Pilates, yoga, or dancer's body, but a lot of it boils down to genetics. Some people are predisposed to putting on more muscle mass than others," she explained.

And diet also plays a role.