

A Functional Approach to Exercise

What is Functional Fitness?

We move our bodies in many different directions and ways as we walk, stand, cook, clean, shower, or garden. Exercising from a *functional* approach involves training the body to improve its ability to perform these types of everyday activities. Functional fitness focuses on building a body capable of doing real-life activities in real-life positions. For example, both squats and knee extensions improve the strength of the quadriceps, but squats will have more of an impact on improving your ability to rise from a chair. The brain, which controls muscular movement, thinks in terms of whole motions, not individual muscles. When you exercise from a functional approach, you are training the brain to stimulate movements that have a greater effect on your whole body.

How to Exercise Using a Functional Approach

Creating an exercise routine from a functional approach begins by identifying the movements that you would like to improve. A fitness professional experienced in designing an exercise program with a functional approach can identify the exercises that will best improve your ability to perform specific activities. A professional can also demonstrate the proper form you should use while exercising, thus minimizing your risk for injury.

A functional approach to exercise includes the following:

Movements specific to an activity

A functional fitness program must be *specific*; that is, it needs to develop and maintain strength that is specific to the activity. For example, if you want to improve your ability to stand from a seated position, exercising for a functional purpose means focusing on the muscles that will enable you to stand from various surfaces and heights. Be sure to include a variety of exercises that work on flexibility, core, balance, strength, and power.

Functional equipment

Other popular tools that promote functional exercise are stability balls and wobble boards, both of which force you to use your core to keep your body

balanced while you are lifting a weight. Any piece of equipment that can help all your muscles to work together for a specific purpose can also be included, such as medicine balls, resistance tubes, and balance disks.

Exercises that Move the Body in Every Direction

The body has a natural ability to move in three types of motion: side to side, front to back, and twisting and rotating. Traditional weight machines are often restricted to a single type of motion, which is unnatural and does not resemble the movements we make during our regular daily activities.

Exercises that are progressive

Progressive training steadily increases the strength demanded as workouts become more advanced. While most people are aware of the need for this in relation to traditional strength training, it is often overlooked in functional training. For functional training it also means varying the speed of movement to make it more activity specific. In the beginning, *utilize your body weight* to train your body to control and balance its own weight. Over time, incorporate *free weights* once you can control and balance your own body weight, slowly increasing the weight as comfortable.



The Benefits of Functional Fitness

Functional fitness can primarily bring balance to your body, shifting the responsibility of movement to the appropriate muscles. With MS, certain muscle groups compensate for their weaker counterparts, which creates poor alignment. Proper balance improves muscular coordination and joint stability, promoting good posture and core strength. A functional fitness routine can increase balance, agility, flexibility, strength, and endurance. In doing so, it will enhance your ability to safely and effectively perform regular activities with minimal risk of injury.

Additional benefits of functional fitness include both an increase in energy level and an enhanced coordinated relationship between the nervous and muscular

systems. Ultimately, functional fitness leads to greater independence when doing daily activities.

Why is Functional Exercise Important for Individuals with MS?

Functional fitness is an ideal approach for people with MS who have experienced changes in gait, balance, coordination, and in some cases levels of fatigue and/or strength, because this type of training helps the body to compensate for these deficiencies. Individuals with MS may experience weakness in certain muscles, which forces another area to take on the extra duty. This perpetuates the weakness and puts you at risk of injury from the overuse/misuse of the compensating area.

When performed successfully, functional exercise can help maximize strength and minimize the overuse of muscles that have been compensating for their weaker counterparts.

Each exercise program needs to be individualized to your current level of fitness and possible changing symptoms during each session. Functional exercise will lead to overall improved health, the ability to easily perform daily activities, enhanced quality of life, and greater independence.