

# Functional Fitness: Working out for Real Life Functions

## What is Functional Fitness?

**Functional fitness may be among the latest buzzwords in gyms these days, but for good reason. It's about training your body to handle real-life situations.**

You may have a toned, tight, and strong body. Yesterday you had a great workout at the gym. You're bench-pressing more weight than ever before, and pulling enough weight on the seated rowing machine to try out for the Olympic sculling team, but is your body ready to do daily activities. Today, you shovel a little snow-- and throw your back out. What happened? Most likely you're not paying enough attention to your functional fitness. Are you ready to lift your toddler from a car seat, carry a bag of salt, or pick up a loaded box?

Functional fitness and functional exercise focuses on building a body capable of doing real-life activities in real-life positions, not just lifting a certain amount of weight in an idealized posture created by a gym machine.

Functional fitness combines multi-movement exercises and teaches multiple muscles to work together, rather than isolating a muscle group through conventional weight training.

## Making Muscles Work Together

Conventional weight training isolates muscle groups, but it doesn't teach the muscle groups you're isolating to work together. The key to functional exercise is integration. It's about teaching all the muscles to work together rather than isolating them to work independently.

An example of a functional exercise is a bent-over row; not the kind of row you do on a seated machine, but the kind you do leaning over a bench, holding the weight in one hand with your arm hanging straight down, and then pulling the weight up as your elbow points to the ceiling, finishing with your upper arm parallel to the ground. This type of exercise will build the muscles of the back, the shoulders, the arms, and because of its nature will really work your whole body.

Compare that motion to a carpenter bending over a piece of wood, a nurse bending over a bed to transfer a patient, or an auto mechanic bending over to adjust your carburetor. Anyone doing a bent-over row will find a carryover in things you do in normal life. Contrast that with the seated row: You're sitting in a chair with your chest pressed against pads, and you pull two levers back. You may be strengthening certain muscles, but your body's not learning anything, because you don't have to activate your core stabilizer muscles or the stabilizers of your arms and shoulders. The machine's doing it for you.

In functional fitness most of the time you should be standing on your own two feet and supporting your own weight when you lift anything.

## Control and Balance the Body

In fact, to get started with functional fitness, you might want to forget about the weights entirely at first. Most people can't even control their own body weight and can't do a one-legged squat without falling over. Try it now; can you?

It might not be a problem for you to lie down on a leg-press machine and press 500 pounds, but then not have the muscular control for a one-legged squat because you lack the stability of the muscles working together. That's why, when we walk downstairs or reach up to get something out of a high cabinet, a lot of us have pain.

Your first step, should be to teach your body to control and balance its own weight. Start with simple movements, like the one-legged squat, and other balance exercises. Then try standing on one leg on a step-stool that's perhaps eight inches high, and then lower the heel of your other foot to the ground, while controlling your body weight as you go down and back up. Switch sides during each maneuver to promote balance and muscle integration on either side of your body.

Once you can control and balance your own body weight, then you can start working with added weights. Put a five-pound dumbbell on a level chair, and then do the same one-legged squat, but this time pick up the dumbbell as you come up. Next, pick up the same weight from the ground while doing the squat. That's challenging your total body integration, and teaching the upper body to work with the lower body. Other popular tools that promote functional exercise are things like stability balls, balancing disks, the Bosu and the "wobble board," all of which force you to work your core to keep your body balanced while you're lifting a weight.

## **Function Follows Form**

No, you don't have to abandon the weight machines at the gym for a program that's all about free weights and balance. Especially if there are isolated weaknesses that will cause a detriment to functional movement. If you don't address integration then strong muscles get stronger and the weak ones stay weak, thereby creating a pattern of compensation. By blending the two together, functional exercises teach isolated muscles how to work together.

Jumping into functional exercise may startle some people who are used to working on machines alone: It's a lot harder! Functional exercise is much more neurologically demanding than machine exercises. You may not be able to do functional exercise with the same levels of intensity followed by short rest periods as with machine exercise. And unlike traditional weightlifting on machines, with functional exercise, if you 'train to failure' -- you train to fail. Instead, your set ends when you can no longer perform the exercise with perfect form.

### **Exercises**

Bent over row

One legged squat

Squat with front raise

Lunges

High step and drive

### **Equipment**

Stability ball, wobble board, balancing disks, and the Bosu are types of equipment that force you to use your core and multiple muscles to stabilize your body during the exercise. You can add varying weight dumbbells, steps, bench, or a chair to progress your functional workouts. Take it slow, the longer you have been with out exercise the more time it takes to build your body back up.