[IMAGE]

Training With a Purpose: Making Muscles Work Together

By Miranda Mirsec

Functional fitness and functional exercise training are commonly used buzz words among fitness professionals. But what do these words really mean, and how can you make them work for you?

WHAT

"Functional fitness" is the level of fitness necessary for a person to take care of personal, household, social and daily living needs. Functional fitness focuses on improving your ability to perform daily living activities, such as walking, lifting, standing and carrying.

This level of function is about maximizing the efficiency of the body's physiological system. Therefore, "functional exercise" focuses on building or training 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.

WHO

This concept is ideal for anyone who has experienced changes in gait, balance, coordination, and in some cases, levels of fatigue and/or reduced strength (for example, people afflicted with multiple sclerosis - MS). Functional exercise requires more energy for the body to compensate for areas of dysfunction.

Woman doing handstand. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **HOW**

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

Woman sitting on exercise ball. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Integration particularly is important for people living with a debilitating disease. As illness affects particular parts of the body, other areas compensate for the weakness. Without teaching the muscles how to work in unison, over time, strong muscles get stronger and the weak ones stay weak. However, functional exercise teaches isolated muscles how to work together.

To get started with functional fitness, you might want to forget about the weights entirely at first. Taking the focus off the machine or weight allows individuals to concentrate on the movement itself - helping to build stability and strength in the muscles, allowing them to work together effectively, as they were designed to do.

The first step should be to teach your body to control/balance its own weight. Start with simple movements, such as one-legged squats and other balance exercises. Be sure to 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, you can start working with added weights. Put a five-pound dumbbell on a level chair, and then do the same one-legged squats, but this time, pick up the dumbbell as you come up. Next, pick up the same weight from the ground while doing the squat. This challenges your total body integration and teaches the upper body to work with the lower body.

Other popular tools that promote functional exercise are stability balls and the "wobble board," both of which force you to work your core to keep your body balanced while you're lifting a weight.

WHY

When our car's tires are off balance, we use more gas and wear out the tires sooner. Plus, the car does not steer as easily as it would if the tires were balanced. The same thing happens with our bodies - when we are weak in one area, another area takes on the extra duties and, in turn, perpetuates the weakness and risks injury due to overuse/misuse.

When performed successfully, functional exercise can help maximize strength and minimize overuse of muscles that compensate for their weaker counterparts. This translates to overall improved health, the ability to more easily perform the activities of daily living, enhanced quality of life and greater independence.

WHERE

The key to success is quality supervision and help in implementing a good functional fitness program. Look for a professional who holds a degree in kinesiology or other related field, someone certified by a national organization who holds education in working with clients with illness, injury, etc. Centers that specialize in post rehabilitation clients or athletes often have multidiscipline professionals who understand training from a functional perspective.

To find a trainer with a background in functional exercise in your area, visit www.acefitness.org or www.ideafit.org.

Miranda Mirsec, MA, CES, has specialized in adaptive physical health programming for more than 15 years in a diversity of settings, currently as director of health and wellness for the National MS Society. She is passionate about making it possible for individuals of all ability levels to access the wealth of benefits a healthy and active lifestyle can bring.

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