

Are You Functionally Fit?

Yesterday you had a great workout at the gym. You're leg-pressing more weight than ever before, and 'spinning' fast enough to try out for the Olympic cycling team. But today, you picked up the laundry basket and 'put your back out'.



What happened?

It's most likely that you're not paying enough attention to your functional fitness. You might be buffed, beautiful and ready to hit the beach in your new bikini, but are you ready to lift your toddler out of the car seat or hang the washing on the clothes-line?

What is functional fitness?

Functional fitness quite literally means that you are fit to function in your daily life. That is, your body can operate efficiently to perform all the basic tasks you need to do on a day-to-day basis. To achieve functional fitness, we need to train our bodies to move in the same way as we do everyday – hanging out washing and lifting the kids. We need to incorporate exercises into our training, which improve our functional fitness by strengthening our core stabilising muscles and challenging our balance and coordination.

Why is it important?

Functional fitness affects us all. It is not just those of us who want to run a marathon or look good in a bikini that need to be functionally fit, but most of us don't think about it until we incur an injury which inhibits our daily functioning.

Most of our movements require the use of our limbs. Think of all the things you do in a day where you are using your hands or feet in movement. Walking, typing, ironing, playing sport ... the list goes on. To effectively use our limbs, we must learn to control the core muscles of the body. The muscles stabilising the spine and trunk are often referred to as the 'core'. We live in a world dominated by gravity and the core muscles let us control the transfer of energy we generate during activity. It can be said that the core muscles are the origin of all body movement and so to have effective movement we must learn to control and stabilise the core muscles.

How do I improve my functional fitness?

A good functional exercise program should take into consideration the way you might actually lift a weight (such as a full laundry basket) in your everyday life or the movements that your body is required to perform in your chosen sporting arena. Functional exercise places emphasis on developing balance, coordination and body awareness (proprioception), which is essential in developing good motor patterns (movement or technique). The key to this is training all the muscles to work in conjunction rather than in isolation. The days of attempting to "isolate" an individual muscle group while training are all but over. The exercises we perform should integrate the use of multiple muscle groups and be applicable to the physical tasks we perform throughout our day. Quite simply, we must "train the movement, NOT THE MUSCLE".

We all know that unless we train for a specific sport or event, we have little chance of performing well and have an enormous chance of sustaining an injury. We aren't going to wake up one morning, decide we want to run a marathon and then do it that day. Even if you are 'fighting fit', it takes many months of preparation and specific training for our bodies to be able to perform such a task. So why would our day-to-day activities be any different? We need to train our bodies to be able to perform our normal daily tasks, not just so we can perform at our optimum but, more importantly, to reduce the risk of incurring an injury. Try incorporating a Swiss ball, wobble board or any other unstable training platform into your program and feel the power of balance!