



Finn Fitness & Wellness

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FUNCTIONAL TRAINING

Functional training is one of the latest buzzwords in magazines and health clubs around the world. The term *functional training* is specifically attached to the individual the training program was designed for. I am following a functional training program designed for me. All of my clients are following functional training programs. None of my clients' training programs would be functional for me, because I have specific capabilities and objectives that are different from theirs. No two clients training programs are the same because they are designed for different people at different levels who have different goals. My definition of functional training is a training program designed to progress an individual from their current health and capabilities to a higher and more effective level of desired health and performance, in a highly structured and efficient time frame.

What is a functional exercise? A *functional exercise* is an exercise that an individual can perform correctly that allows them to reach their *own* training objectives. For example, a heavy bench press is a functional exercise for a professional bodybuilder who needs to add more muscle size to the chest. A heavy bench press is not a functional exercise for a golfer. A golfer needs to rotate the body quickly with a light object in the hands. So, a golfer needs speed and flexibility, and the bodybuilder needs large muscles that they can accentuate on command. Therefore, rather than exercising using a heavy bench press, a golfer should perform an exercise, such as a standing cable wood chop, that would enable the entire body to work as one unit with a lot of rotation.

Exercising on machines is not functional training for the majority of people in this world. Consider this: How many times do you find yourself bolted to the floor, all the while moving either arms or legs in the same plane of motion? We never move that way. Typically we walk across the floor, bend to pick things up, and press things to the side and overhead, using all three planes of motion at the same time. All of our joints are connected, and all are meant to work together. Machines work one joint at a time, and therefore joints do not learn how to work together. Machines are effective in very specific situations, such as for individuals who have experienced brain injuries and may have difficulty moving a particular, or all of their joints. Our abdominal muscles and other stabilizing muscles "turn off" when we are using an exercise machine. As an example, try this simple exercise: Stand up straight and place your hands on your abdominal muscles so you can feel the muscles in front and on the sides. Next, pick your right foot off the ground – you should feel the abdominal muscles "turn on." If nothing moves at all, or you find that can't even stand on one foot, this may indicate that your abdominal muscles have already been turned off from a lack of activity, or from a previous injury. If this is the case you really should find a CHEK-certified trainer to help you develop a functional exercise plan designed for your own personal needs.

Some of you might be thinking that as you are not an athlete, and that you don't typically do anything strenuous, functional training does not apply to you. However, functional training is *not* only for athletes! Functional training is for anyone who wants to be able to move, twist and bend with facility – without struggling, and without experiencing pain. The probability of an individual with weak or limited movement patterns of developing an injury, especially a back injury, escalates. Twisting movements of the spine are integral to almost every single movement executed in a functional environment. Most of us climb in and out of a car every day, and depending upon how low the car is, climbing into a car typically requires a single leg squat with a twist. It is common to

see people struggling and pulling with the arms to slide into a car seat. Add a shopping bag in one hand, or a child, and this movement becomes even more difficult. What about taking a heavy trash can down the driveway? In this example, one is maneuvering the weight of a bulky object along an uneven surface. What about carrying a load of laundry down stairs while children are running by and playing? In this scenario one is carrying a heavy weight over unstable ground, you can't see your feet, and kids are bumping into you. As a professional athlete, a football player is exposed to all of these variables on the playing field, but he must also be prepared to be tackled.

Illustrated below is an example of how slight changes in one specific exercise will make it more effective and functional for the particular needs of two different individuals. Although the two people in this example are of average strength and health, one person is a casual weekend runner, and the other crews on a local rowing team.

EXERCISE: *Supine Leg Curl with Feet on Swiss Ball – Runner*

When one walks or runs, the hip extends backwards and the knee flexes backwards. Therefore the *runner* performing this exercise should extend the hips and flex the knees at the same time, as in pictures 1 and 2 below:



Runner: Picture 1



Runner: Picture 2

EXERCISE: *Supine Leg Curl with Feet on Swiss Ball – Rower*

When crewing in a boat, the *rower* flexes the knees as they slide themselves forward for the next pull stroke. Although they also bend and flex at the hip at the same time, as would a runner, the *rower* will perform this exercise slightly differently so that they flex at the hip *and the knee* at the same time, as in pictures 3 and 4 below:



Rower: Picture 1



Rower: Picture 2

Now here comes the tricky part: The runner should *never* do the exercise the way the rower does. However, at certain times of the year the rower *should* perform this exercise the way the runner does, because the rower still walks, runs, and plays, like the runner, as part of their daily lifestyle. Should a rower always performs the exercise the “rower way,” they will start walking and running only using the hamstrings they use when rowing, which could cause over-use and injury to these muscles over time.

What does this mean for you? We urge you to not waste your time exercising on machines, or doing physical exercises that are not anything like what you do every day. This will only make your body more dysfunctional, and your life more difficult. Pick and design exercises that are similar to your own daily physical activities, or, even better, find a CHEK-certified trainer near you to design a functional training program just for you.

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