

Just Keep Moving.....

Functional fitness programs help older adults maintain quality of life

Pay attention to your body as you walk. Do your shoulders round forward? Is your low back on fire? Minor imbalances can throw the body out of whack, but most are surprisingly easy to fix.

Whether you're dealing with an illness or injury or you simply want to be able to play with your grandkids, functional fitness programs can keep you fully participating in life as you age.

"Rather than working toward six-pack abs or huge biceps, it's about having enough upper body strength to retrieve something from the top shelf or being able to bend over and tie your shoes and get back up again. It's working with people as they age so that they can function efficiently, and not be in pain, and it's becoming more of a trend," says Diane Horak, health and wellness program manager with the City of Fort Collins, Columbine Health Systems and University of Colorado Health partnership.



Personalized functional fitness programs target specific areas of the body to improve strength, balance and stability and work to correct harmful movement patterns that develop over time.

"Gait training is one of the primary things we do with older adults," says Susan Ross, physical therapist at Front Range Therapy. This includes evaluating whether one's head leans too far forward when they walk or if their steps are symmetrical. "As we get older, walking correctly is as important as being stable while walking—someone shuffling their feet is at greater risk of falling."

Maintaining strength and a good sense of balance to prevent falls and hospitalizations becomes increasingly important as we age, as does preserving independence.

"We focus on activities of daily living, which helps older adults remain in their own homes and independent as long as possible," says Kristina Kuskie, physical therapist at Front Range Therapy.

Maybe you need to be able to walk to the mailbox, shop for groceries and do your own housework. Or perhaps you long to be able to run, bike and ski again. "The emphasis is on strengthening the little muscles needed for whatever daily activities you'd like to be able to do in a way that's safe for you," says Debra Williamson, personal trainer at the Lifestyle Center. "We keep it realistic."

With more emphasis on increasing overall strength and balance, functional fitness programs utilize tools such as resistance bands and straps, parallel bars, balance pads and boards, foam rollers, stability balls and hydraulic machines that work opposing muscle groups.

"Functional fitness includes a variety of things. It's about using many different muscles in your body in many different planes of motion—the way we do in real life, which is not always straight ahead or straight to the side," says Horak.

A well-rounded functional fitness program typically includes a combination of dynamic warm-ups and bodyweight exercises, gradual resistance and strength training, rotation and extension exercises, balance work and cardio. But it can be difficult to know where to start if you've grown accustomed to simply dealing with physical discomfort in your body. "No pain, no gain is false," says Williamson. "You're not supposed to be in pain when you exercise."

And while aging is part of life, it doesn't mean that immobility is inevitable. "Exercise is important at every age," says Ross. "People don't realize they've gotten as weak as they have until they have a fall or experience having trouble getting out of a chair."

Plus, exercise makes you feel better. It can help you get off pain medication and stay healthy during the colder winter months. And there's nobody an individualized functional fitness plan can't help.

"To counteract what aging does to you, keep your strength up," says Horak. "It's the fountain of youth." ✨



Interested in learning more about how a functional fitness program could enhance your life?

- An evaluation and referral by your primary care physician is the first step to take in figuring out how this type of exercise program could help you.
- Most gyms and fitness centers now have professional trainers on staff that specialize in functional fitness. Ask the management staff where you exercise what's available.