

# Newsletter

October 2007

## Functionally fit: Exercises for real life

Workout program designed to make it easier to handle the chores of every day life and the rigours of sport

Jill Barker, CanWest News Service

Do you scratch your head when you hear the term "functional fitness?" You aren't alone. In a fitness industry rife with lingo, functional fitness ranks up there with the least understood.

When it comes to trends, however, functional fitness is more than just a passing phase. Why? Because contrary to traditional fitness programs that seem more concerned about increasing the size of your biceps or flattening your tummy, the goal of functional fitness is to make it easier to handle the chores of every day life and the rigours of sport.

At its most basic, functional fitness improves strength, mobility and balance, three physical assets that deteriorate as we age or become sedentary.

While traditional fitness programs promise to do the same, the difference is that functional training serves to cover all three bases in one exercise.

Still confused? Most traditional exercises isolate specific muscles and joints to build strength or improve flexibility. Yet in real life, movement rarely relies on one muscle or one joint at a time. It demands the combined effort of several muscles and joints.

Take a traditional exercise like a leg curl, most often performed on a machine while you lie on your stomach with your ankles hooked under a weighted bar. As the bar is lifted and the feet move toward the buttocks, the hamstring muscles and knee joint are active while everything else remains passive. But in everyday life, you rarely use your hamstrings in isolation.

Most lower-body movements -- walking, running, lunging, squatting and standing up -- require the foot, ankle, knee, hip and core muscles to work together to get the job done. Not only do these major muscle groups fire in a co-ordinated pattern during movement, so too do the small stabilizer muscles responsible for balance.

Functional exercises replicate that muscular chain reaction that occurs during movement, and improve its strength and efficiency. So instead of working the hamstrings in isolation on a machine, a functional exercise like a lunge works all the muscles of the lower body.

The other difference between machine-based exercises and functional exercises is the direction of movement. In real life, the body moves in a three dimensions, whereas most machine-based exercises are one-dimensional.

Consider the kind of movement necessary to play tennis. Players step toward the ball in a variety of directions -- forward, sideways and on the diagonal -- and rotate their core during the swing action. All of this is done with speed, precision, balance and co-ordination. For tennis players then, standing lunges done with speed and concurrent upper body rotation are more functional than a machine-based lower-body exercise.

For an exercise to qualify as functional, it should replicate a real-life movement pattern, with a similar range of motion and speed. Squatting and reaching (as when getting something from the bottom cupboard), lunging and twisting (as in squash or tennis) all qualify as exercises that move the body in a variety of directions and require the actions of more than one muscle group.

So where in your workout do functional exercises fit? Certainly in a sport-specific warmup, where you want to prepare your body for the activity ahead. Start with functional movements that you perform in your sport and move at a slow pace, with a small range of motion.

Slowly increase the pace and depth of movement as your joints become more limber and your body more ready for game action.

The weight room is another place to include functional exercises. Use a cable machine and incorporate chopping exercises that pull the weight diagonally across the body; hold dumbbells and press them overhead as you stand up from a squat; hold a weighted bar over your shoulders and lunge forward, diagonally and to the side; stand on one leg and reach overhead with one arm holding a dumbbell in your elevated hand.

But don't go overboard. Functional exercises are important, but they aren't the be-all and end-all. They are just one facet of a well-designed, comprehensive workout designed to enhance overall fitness and sports performance. Pick a few key functional exercises and do them regularly, preferably after your regular round of traditional exercises so that you are well warmed up and able to co-ordinate the multi-joint, multidirectional movements.

Now that you understand the importance of functional fitness, what it entails and how to incorporate it into your workout, you're all set to give it a go. Start by choosing two or three key exercises and slowly increase until you have one functional exercise for every traditional one (you may have to exchange some of your traditional exercises for a similar, more functional one).

Not only will your workout be suit your lifestyle better, it will add a much needed boost to your fitness routine.