

Many people deal with back or joint pain, balance problems, and other issues that can make day-to-day activities seem difficult and even agonizing. Tailoring your workout to include functional fitness exercises can increase your body's ability to handle daily tasks and complete them with ease. Rather than lifting weights with a machine, complete your workout using real-life positions to prepare for real-life situations. TOPS Club, Inc. (Take Off Pounds Sensibly), the nonprofit weight-loss support organization, explains functional fitness and its benefits.

What is Functional Fitness?

Most individuals are not competitive athletes but aim to exercise regularly to improve their quality of life. Functional fitness exercises help people achieve that goal. With a strong focus on using one's entire body at once, functional fitness stimulates common movements you would do at home, at work, or in sports.

"Functional fitness exercises are designed to train and develop your muscles to make it easier and safer to perform everyday tasks, such as carrying groceries or throwing a Frisbee with the kids," explains Amy Goldwater, M.S., fitness educator, former body building champion, and physical fitness expert for TOPS.

How can I perform functional fitness exercises?

Functional fitness exercises can be done at home or at the gym. In fact, some gyms offer functional fitness courses or incorporate concepts into boot camps and other classes.

"Exercise equipment such as fitness balls, kettle bells, and weights are often used in functional fitness workouts," says Goldwater. "These exercises tend to be multi-joint, multi-muscle exercises." In the beginning, individuals should consider only using their own body weight for resistance, slowly adding weight and increasing the intensity level as their fitness ability improves.

An example of a functional fitness exercise is the squat-to-bicep curl. Start with your feet shoulder-width apart, spine straight, and core stable. Holding dumbbells at your sides, slowly bend through the hips, knees, and ankles until your knees reach a 90-degree angle. As you slowly return to the starting position, turn your palms toward the ceiling, flex your arms, and curl the dumbbells toward your shoulders.

"The squat-to-bicep curl is a form of functional fitness, because it trains the muscles that are used to pick up an object—a laundry basket, bag, or young child—from the floor or a table," explains Goldwater. "It is an exercise that combines upper- and lower-body movements."

What are the benefits?

- Reduces the risk of injury—functional fitness prevents injuries that can be caused by daily tasks and prepares your body to adjust to life's unexpected twists and turns, so they don't turn into more severe injuries.
- Prepares the body to perform everyday duties—functional fitness workouts train your body to perform daily activities—walking, bending, lifting, climbing stairs, and more—without pain or discomfort. "The goal isn't just to gain strength, but also to increase flexibility, range of motion, joint alignment, and body awareness," says Goldwater.
- Emphasizes core stability—strengthening your abdomen can improve balance to avoid falls and help your posture.
- Improves quality of life—functional fitness exercises can offer individuals peace of mind knowing they have better control of their bodies and the ability to perform activities safely and

efficiently.