Let’s face it, as we grow older, one of the biggest fears we have is losing our independence. Maintaining your capability to perform the common activities of daily living is fundamental to your ability to live independently. Strategically exercising to focus on enhancing your functional fitness will help you stay independent and enjoy life.
Maintaining Your Independence

As we age, the incidences of functional limitations increase dramatically, often leading to disability and falls. These are the primary reasons people move to nursing homes and assisted-living facilities. Integrating functional fitness into your routine is a healthy aging strategy that helps improve your balance, agility and muscle strength, along with reducing your fall risk.

Functional fitness exercises are designed to train and develop your muscles to make it easier and safer for you to perform everyday activities, such as carrying groceries or picking up your grandchildren. They are practical exercises that replicate actions such as getting up from a toilet or getting out of bed.

Functional fitness focuses on strengthening and simulating common large body movements you do at home, at work or in sports. These exercises emphasize core stability while simultaneously using various muscles in your upper and lower body.

Combating Muscle Loss

Although we all will have some degree of muscle loss as we age, how much muscle is lost and how fast it happens depends on how well you take care of your body. The best medicine available to maintain muscle mass is exercise and a healthy diet. Staying active and exercising regularly can significantly slow your muscle loss.

Losing muscle mass limits your ability to take care of yourself. Simple tasks like getting dressed, using the bathroom and walking become difficult. As muscle mass decreases, it becomes harder to maintain your balance or walk at a normal speed which both increase falling risk. The consequences of falling are not just injury or an extended medical stay, but the loss of your ability to live independently.

While loss of muscle mass is a process that naturally comes with aging, you have the power to control it. Regularly making time to fit functional exercise into your schedule is worth it. You will see long-term benefits not only in strength, but also improvement in your overall health and your quality of life.

Strength and Balance Prevent Falls

A well-rounded fitness program designed for optimal aging also includes core and balance training to combat muscle loss and minimize fall risks. Incorporating flexibility training too can improve muscular function and your range of motion.

Core exercises train your pelvis, lower back, hips and abdomen muscles to work in harmony. This leads to better balance and stability. A strong core makes it easier to do everything from swinging a golf club to bending down to tie your shoes or walking your dog. Functional fitness exercises emphasize core stability because you use various muscles in the upper and lower body at the same time.

Balance exercises are particularly important for older adults because they prevent falls. Nearly any activity that keeps you on your feet and moving, such as walking, can help you maintain good balance. Since many older adults already use walking as their primary exercise for cardiovascular health, this activity provides a dual benefit. Even practicing single leg stands can improve your stability.

Final Thoughts

Make sure your approach to exercise is designed to help you achieve your overall fitness goals and increase your ability to remain independent. As you add more functional exercises to your workout, you will have the strength and stamina to participate in activities that bring enjoyment and fun into your life. That’s quite a return on your exercise investment!
Those who participate in an exercise program experience many health benefits. No matter when you start, you will gain many positive benefits from exercising that can make a big difference in your health. Even if you are not now physically active, it is never too late to start. Focus your fitness plan based on the goals you hope to achieve in the future. Hope is a positive and powerful motivator. Hope is saying to yourself, “I want to be healthy for my grandchildren. I don’t want to be in the hospital the last years of my life. I want to travel. I want to continue to live independently.” By focusing on what you want to achieve, you can develop a fitness program designed to attain your goals. Focusing on your hopes for the future will help you stick to your program and get results. Determine what you desire for your future. Then do something about it and don’t give up!

EXPERT INSIGHT

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GOAL: Evaluate your fitness regime to identify one new functional fitness exercise you can add into it.
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