- Exercise

FIT FOR LIFE

What does getting fit and staying fit look like as we age? 'Functional fitness' is not only about being able to continue with exercise or sport as we grow older, but also maintaining a range of movement to enable everyday moves, such as bending, squatting and reaching. Do these exercises and your future self will thank you.

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Opposite page: To maintain flexibility, improve joint stability and reduce the risk of injury, add stretching movements to your daily life. The hamstrings and hip flexors can get tight as we age so gentle yoga poses and stretches can keep these muscles supple. This inversion stretch (where your head is lower than your heart) stretches out the lower body and also helps to build strength. Inversion stretches can also stimulate the lymphatic system and aid digestion.
This page: When going from sitting to standing, try not to use your arms so leg muscles are strengthened.

People are living longer. Worldwide, the average life expectancy of a newborn in 1900 was 32 years old. In 2021, the global average had more than doubled to 71 years. Over the past five decades, life expectancy in New Zealand has increased for males to 80.5 and for females to 84. But perhaps, more than just living longer, it is important to improve the overall health and quality of life as you age.

The body experiences many changes as we grow older. According to the Mayo Clinic, as we age our bones tend to shrink in size and density, weakening them and making them more susceptible to fracture. Muscles generally lose strength, endurance, and flexibility, affecting the body's balance, stability and coordination.

Speaking with Fiona Milne, Director and Owner of Spring Physio in Melbourne, she shares, "I just had a 90-year-old fellow walk down from his residential care home to do half an hour of exercise consisting of resistance exercises with me for his balance, strength and mobility."

According to Milne, "Functional Fitness is keeping your body strong and mobile so that it can perform your day-to-day tasks with more ease as we get older, and with less risk of injury." She emphasises, "It is about keeping you strong and mobile to do anything else you want, like staying on the tennis court, golf course, or gardening without feeling sore, stiff and achy at the end of the weekend. It's one thing to live a long life. But it's another thing to live a life in which you're able to do things like reaching for things in a cupboard or bending down to pick up something."

STRENGTH & FLEXIBIITY

Exercising consistently is important. Milne explains, "If you're strong and your muscles, bones, and joints have the flexibility that they require, it's much easier to get through all your day-to-day tasks and your leisure pursuits without the risk of injury." She says, "In our 40s, some of our tendons start to get a little irritable when you push them to do more than they're capable of. But if we work in the gym to get stronger and more mobile then you get to increase capacity to perform the things you want to do without risk of injury."

For the past 12 years, Spring Physio has been offering functional fitness classes, combining upper and lower body workouts together. It involves functional movement patterns, aerobic activity, balance work, and mobility in one class, all led by a physiotherapist. Their clients were referred by surgeons for post-op care or might have come from GPs to manage their injuries. With physios leading the class, they can take into account the injuries. They provide strength training without aggravating the injury or damaging something else. Milne suggests doing strength training for a minimum of twice a week to maintain, while doing it three times a week will result in gains and forward progress. The functional fitness classes gives her regular attendees motivation to stay fit and an outlet for socialisation. It also allows their clients to achieve their goals. "We've got some people joining our classes in their 60s or 70s because they want to get strong for their walking holiday, or they want to go skiing, but don't want to get injured," says Milne.

For Adele Danastasio, senior physiotherapist at South Melbourne Physio, "I would say functional fitness is the ability of your body to perform movements that are needed for general-day to-day tasks like carrying shopping bags, pushing a trolling, getting out of a chair or couch, the ability to stand up and sit down, or even climbing the stairs to get to a medical appointment."

She points out: "A lot of the older population that we see, their goals are around being independent and staying in their own home. Over our lifespan, starting from when we're younger, we have the opportunity to try and be as fit as possible. The fitter we can be when we're younger, the better hopefully we cope with our body's decline. We have a natural decline in muscle mass as we age. It's called sarcopenia. So if we don't stay fit, and if we don't continue to exercise, that decline will probably be more rapid compared with another person."

Both Milne and Danastasio believe it's never too late to improve your fitness. Danastasio says: "It's never too late to start to try and build up someone's functional fitness. Just because we experience a natural age-related drop in muscle mass, it doesn't mean that we also can't gain muscle in that time. If you work your muscles and you're going through general strength training principles, you will gain muscle."





This page, top: Push-ups increase upper body strength and also improve flexibility and posture. They can be adjusted to suit any fitness level and studies have found they also improve heart health. ***This page, bottom:*** The plank pose works the entire body effectively in one static position. When you first try doing this pose, the hips tend to hike upward or sag down, but try to keep them in a straight line between the shoulders and the heel. You can also perform the plank with your knees and/or forearms on the ground. Either way, keep your elbows directly under your shoulders and your head relaxed.

Exercises to live life independently in older age

1 Step Up, Step Up

Using the stairway, you would go right foot up, then the left foot. Keep the right leg on the step as you step down with the left, because the right leg is still working to control this one back down. It has to take your bodyweight, and then it will go down. So you can keep your foot on the step. Do 10 on one side, then change sides.

This lower body exercise strengthens your legs, and your glutes. It's a more difficult exercise than a sit to stand, because you're having to control your balance and negotiate the step in front of you. In this exercise, you are relying on one side of your body, so if you have horrible balance, standing on one leg and trying to go up a step, then it's going to be quite difficult. That's why it's a good exercise to do regularly.

You're increasing your strength, your functional ability, and your confidence. A lot of it comes down to gaining the competence to go up those three steps instead of using the ramp when you go to the shopping centre.

2 Push Up

It can either be on your knees or your feet. A push up is good for overall upper body strength: biceps, triceps, pecs, chest, and deltoids, as well as your core. It helps when you're carrying heavy shopping bags, pushing the trolley, or even carrying children. Do it on the wall or a bench instead of the floor for an easier option.

3 Plank on the ground

Planks are often misunderstood as only a core exercise, but you're actually using so many more muscles when you're doing a plank. It teaches you good body awareness: Are my hips sagging too much? Is my bum up in the air? Can I keep a really solid, still position? While you are using your core muscles, you are also meant to be tensing your glutes and your quads, so your thighs and your shoulders are working hard to keep you in that position too. It's an exercise that works on a lot of muscle groups.

4 Walking

A lot of people underestimate the power of walking. You may think, "I have a car so I can drive to the shops." But then once you get into the shops, what's the distance that you're actually walking? You may get halfway through your grocery shop, and then have to need to sit down. There's nowhere to sit down. Where do you sit? There's no rest time.

Being able to walk as an exercise is really important. You also need to walk between 0.8 metres per second and 1.2 metres per second to be 'community safe'. In order to safely cross the road, you need to be walking at 1.2 metres per second.

5 From sitting to standing up

Do this 20 times without using your hands to push you off the chair. This works your hands, your glutes, and builds strength in your knees and hips. If you're stronger, don't sit on the chair. Just tap your bottom on the chair, increasing the intensity to a squat.

6 Crab walks

Put a band on your knees, shuffle sideways, walking side to side. It's a gluteal exercise for your hips, as well as benefiting your back. A lot of people with back pain have very weak gluteal muscles.

7 Rows using resistance bands

Typically, over time our posture changes. We crouch forward. By doing rows, we help open up our bodies and improve our posture.



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