



# WORK IT!

CHARGE UP YOUR BODY WITH THE LATEST UPDATE: FUNCTIONAL FITNESS BY ADRIANA ERMTER

Even if you've got a good groove going with your Pilates or BOSU sessions, it's time to switch things up a little. Think back to when fitness experts started touting a strong core; we all filled our closets with yoga gear, bought a stability ball and changed our workout schedule so that it could include core-strengthening exercises. So now that your core's intact, what's the latest essential update to your fitness regime? Two words: functional fitness.

Not to be confused with weight training, functional fitness is comparable to boot camp-style calisthenics (think push-ups, running stairs, lunges, squats and jumping jacks), which teaches the body's muscles to work together "by mimicking our natural body movements," says Yuri Elkaim, founder of Total Wellness Consulting in Toronto. The exercise of functional fitness does provide incredible get-in-shape results, but the real benefit is how its combination of balance, posture, coordination and strength eliminates the potential

for unnecessary pain, injury and muscular discomfort. (Although swimming, Spinning and running are great cardio workouts, "they don't cater to the type of movement you use in everyday life," says Elkaim.)

So while your focus now is more likely about being fit and looking good, "training your body to move with ease, for a lifetime, is what's important," says Brian Shauer, a certified personal trainer who works with the Hollyburn Country Club in West Vancouver. "What use is being able to bench-press 100 pounds in the gym when women continually injure themselves performing basic activities such as moving something out of the trunk of the car?"

"People throw their backs out bending over to pick up a pencil off the floor simply because they haven't developed proper bending/lifting mechanics and have weak, underdeveloped muscles that don't activate properly," says Elkaim. (We even know of a 30-something who strained muscles in her back and neck

just pulling off a stretchy sports bra.) Safety and prevention might not be particularly sexy workout attributes, "but what good is a lean body if you can't use it properly?" says Elkaim.

Luckily, incorporating functional fitness-based exercise into a daily routine is a snap. Check out these four options.

## TRY IT: WORK OUT WITH KETTLEBELLS

Popular with such celebrities as Jennifer Lopez, Penélope Cruz and Claire Danes, kettlebell workouts combine strength training, cardiovascular conditioning, dynamic flexibility and full-body coordination—all while holding, lifting, reaching, pulling and swinging a typically 15–25-lb. kettlebell, an age-old tool from Russia that looks like a bowling ball with a handle. "It's the thinking person's workout because it requires skill, timing and coordination and allows for creativity and easy transfer of mind and body skills to a real-world context," explains Adam Cronin, co-founder of KettleBell Concepts and Soma Fitness & Performance in South Beach, Fla.

**The functional-fitness component:** The leg-press machine at the gym strengthens leg muscles and firms up your butt, but it doesn't work out the hip and back stability muscles you need to stand up and sit down. Unlike traditional exercise programs that focus on working out one muscle at a time, kettlebell classes concentrate on the whole person with each exercise, "teaching you how to move and protect your body's joints simultaneously," explains Cronin. Performing squats while swinging a kettlebell from between your legs to eye level in front of your body engages the leg muscles like a leg press, but it also develops vertical, horizontal and circular muscle and joint strength, movement and stability. "It improves your overall functionality dramatically, with an aesthetically pleasing physique to match," says Cronin. **The benefits:** Because the actual kettlebell is used to represent everyday objects such as your weekly groceries haul or your lovable mutt tugging on its leash, the weight creates the same type of resistance you would encounter and have to overcome in real life. The large range of motion >



NANCY R. COHEN/GETTY

in each exercise also helps to maintain lean body symmetry.

**TRY IT: HIRE A PERSONAL TRAINER**

Because the exercises you complete on the gym's shoulder-press machines, for example, may be about as close to reality as an episode of *The Hills*, consider hiring a personal trainer to be your very own functional-fitness guru. You'll get hands-on demos, and the trainer can guide you through the proper techniques and postures of functional-fitness exercises. **The functional-fitness**

**component:** "We move differently in our daily activities than we typically do in the gym [step class, the elliptical machine, yoga], so it's important to increase strength through common, everyday movement patterns," explains Shauer. **The benefits:** A trainer outlines each functional-fitness exercise and the correct posture, offers reminders or cues, ensures the mechanics of each exercise are executed properly and that the right muscles are recruited to perform each activity. Plus, the trainer explains which activity the functional movement duplicates, such as

squats for sitting and lunges for stairs, and why that is important.

**TRY IT: BOX LIKE LAILA ALI**

Consider those bicep curls you've been doing, isolating that arm muscle in a completely artificial scenario (after all, when have you ever moved your arm in that way other than at the gym?). What ever happened to keeping it real? Boxing's certainly not new, but its integrative approach—including skilled footwork, jabs, hooks and punches—is reason enough to pull on those gloves, pronto. **The functional-fitness component:** Boxing's pretty much got it all, from skipping, squats, sit-ups, push-ups and chin-ups to circuit training with mini trampolines, an agility ladder, wobble boards, slip ropes and resistance tubing. Its blend of movements requires you to use your body's own force and resistance, working several muscle groups at once. **The benefits:** The sport is an all-inclusive workout, ideal for your heart and lungs, PAGE 198 >



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## fitness

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increasing endurance, flexibility and muscle mass, while also burning fat and cellulite. But beyond the overall aerobic-conditioning, body-strengthening and energy-boosting results, in order to progress in boxing, you have to believe in yourself, says Jennifer Holleman, head coach of the Tri-County Mariners Amateur Boxing Club in Yarmouth, N.S., and assistant coach of the 2011 Canada Winter Games boxing team. So there's the added bonus of improving your self-esteem and confidence, too.

### **TRY IT: ADOPT THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD**

Let's face it: most of us have acquired a lifetime of bad habits, such as horrible posture, craning our necks as we work at a computer or bopping in time to iPod tunes while running on the treadmill. Luckily, the Feldenkrais Method encourages efficient movement by "reconnecting your body movements with body awareness, encouraging you to be aware about what you're doing as it happens," explains Marion Harris, founder and director of the Feldenkrais Centre in Toronto. The practice's philosophy revolves around developing a greater consciousness of your body so it can function as efficiently as possible.

**The functional-fitness component:** Much like a yoga class, participants complete a series of walking, sitting, lying down and standing exercises that are executed on individual mats. Performed step-by-step and at a slow pace so you're fully aware of all the sensations involved, the exercises include day-to-day activities most of us now do without a second thought. "We train people to reduce their actual physical effort and focus their attention on what they are doing and why they are doing it," says Harris. "The result will be that the body's comfort range [for mobility and movement] will expand and there will be improved action in real-life situations, such as bending, walking, sitting and reaching," she explains. **The benefits:** Learning to live in the moment by minimizing how much we do on autopilot will improve ease of movement, increase agility and improve posture. Plus, "you will feel more energized and truly relaxed," says Harris. □

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