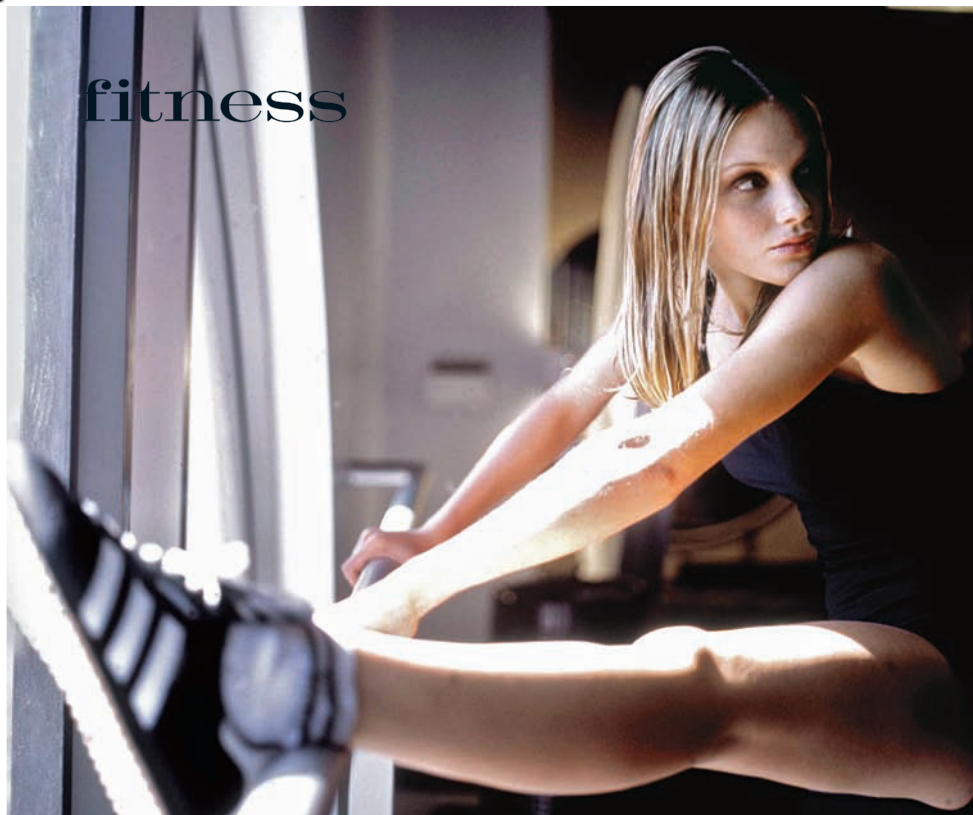




fitness



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: 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. □