

FUNCTIONALLY FIT

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When we think of “fitness” we sometimes fast forward to a vision of a gym, sweating, spandex, etc. But life gives us plenty of chances to “workout” if we are paying attention. For instance, when was the last time you got down on the floor, sat for a bit and then got back up? What did that look like? Was it easy or more difficult than you anticipated?

Many folks I work with jokingly say it’s easier to get down than up, but in all seriousness, the ability to independently move is important for each of us. Research findings have pointed to a link between this functional ability and life longevity and overall health. It makes sense if you consider what fitness components the movement involve, balance, flexibility, and strength. A 3 for 1 bonus!



Many times, cancer treatments can create a syndrome called cachexia. Cachexia includes the deterioration of lean muscle mass, also known as sarcopenia. Both cancer and its treatment can contribute to this syndrome. While some weight loss can be normal during treatment and beyond, the rate at which lean tissue is lost can often be accelerated and cause concern. Loss of lean tissue (muscle) can lead to a reduced functional capacity, which means less energy and less ability to complete activities of daily living. This is when keeping a healthy weight can be vital to the quality of life and physical resiliency.

So, how can we break this de-conditioning cycle? A good place to start is with everyday mindful movements. These are opportunities to tune up your movement efficiency and muscle stimulus through stretches, joint movements, posture-focused exercises, and functional strength building.

If getting down and up from the floor isn't in the cards right now, try some modifications. Could you sit in a lower chair and use less support to stand up safely? Might you try to get down in a kneeling or a hands-and-knees position and then use support to get back up? Or, if getting down and up is easy for you, try to use less support points each time you try. It can also be a brain exercise to try various transfer methods with each repetition you do.

Consider each of these an opportunity to strengthen your important leg muscles, stretch and mobilize your hips, and challenge your balance to build confidence in your abilities in any situation.

The Practice of the Day:

3 steps to get started building strong components of floor transfers.

You can consider each time you stand up from a chair or lower down into a chair as 1 repetition if you do it mindfully. Focus on using the muscles that were designed for this movement that we all know as “the squat”.





Balance

Stand in a split or tandem position. See how far you can distance your front foot from your back while staying upright and avoiding arching your back too much. You can also challenge yourself with how wide or narrow your stance is laterally. Holding this position without locking your knees or holding your breath is a good way to build confidence in your ability to balance while transferring to the floor.



Flexibility

Stiffness in your low back or hips can keep you locked in a way that makes it more difficult to move naturally. A great hip opener is the seated figure 4 stretch. Sit upright on the edge of a sturdy chair and cross one leg over the other. Ideally, you will rest your outside ankle on the thigh of the opposite leg, however, not everyone can start there. Do your best to find a version of this that creates just enough tension but limits real pain or discomfort. This is your starting point. Keeping the posture upright and breathing during the hold of this will help to expand the boundaries of your range of motion gradually.





Strength

Find a support that is sturdy and about waist-high. Hold on to that with 1 hand and try to kneel on one knee. Hint: placing a small pillow where your kneecap touches keeps the knee discomfort to a minimum. As you return to a standing position, focus on pressing the front foot into the floor as if trying to make a full footprint. This will activate all the muscles in the chain of that leg and core. Here's where the strengthening begins.

Complete as many on both sides as you can in good form. Once you start wobbling and feeling muscle fatigue, it's time to end that set. This could be as few as 2 or as many as 10. Everyone starts at their starting line. Slow and steady progress wins this race.

If you are really feeling playful and want to involve your brain in this challenge, try different ways of getting down and up. See how creative you can be.



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Sara Mansfield, MS, NBC-HWC is a Wellness Exercise Specialist for the Healthy Living Program at Mayo Clinic. She holds a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degree in Kinesiology from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is a National Board-Certified Health and Wellness Coach, and is certified through the American College of Sports Medicine as a Certified Exercise Physiologist and a Cancer Exercise Trainer with an Exercise is Medicine® credential. For over 25 years, Sara has worked in a variety of capacities in the health and wellness field, with a specific interest in building lasting healthy lifestyle changes for individuals who have been affected by cancer. Sara's goal is to expand awareness of the endless possibilities for movement and to make movement accessible to all.

