

## BE WELL

### How Do You Measure Up?

By Debbie DeAngelo

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Being strong and fit is pivotal to enjoying your life at any age. Not only does it bring energy and stamina to your day but building muscle strength boosts metabolism. However, just because you exercise, doesn't automatically guarantee that you are functionally fit.

Functional training is about supporting activities of daily living. It helps you perform everyday tasks such as getting up off the floor easily and placing an item up on a shelf without pulling a muscle. Often this requires paying attention to specific exercises or forms of fitness to reinforce this goal.

Maintaining functional fitness as you age is a strong predictor of your quality of life and longevity. Also, it improves coordination, builds balance and endurance, and prevents muscle loss. To assess your current level of functional fitness, conduct these self-tests. The results will provide feedback and guidance on where to focus.

**Chair to stand test.** This reflects lower body power and your ability to lift yourself up after a fall. Brazilian researchers evaluated more than 2,000 men and women ages 51 to 80 in the lower-body power sit-stand test, a more strenuous form of the chair to stand test, which requires sitting and then rising unaided from the floor. Those who could rise from the floor without using their hands and knees outlived their counterparts who required assistance.

The chair to stand test is a gentler modification. Sit in the middle of a hard chair with feet flat on the floor. Cross arms over your chest and keep back straight. Count how many times you can rise to a full standing position and sit back down, without using your arms, in 30 seconds. Standing up at least 10 times is average.

**Stair climbing.** Walk up one flight of stairs while talking or singing. You shouldn't develop chest tightness or become so winded that it interrupts your conversation or song. As stated in a few recent studies, the ease at which you can climb steps, and the more quickly you can do so, is correlated to the condition of your heart. Climbing four flights of stairs (total of 60 steps) in less than one minute indicated good heart health, according to research presented at the European Society of Cardiology.

**Back scratch.** This checks upper body mobility and flexibility, which impacts injury risk. Think of flexibility as being limber and having full range of motion in your joints.

To ascertain upper body flexibility, stand with your arms hanging at your sides. Raise your right arm overhead and bend it down behind your back, palm down. Bend your left elbow and bring it up to clasp your right hand, palm up. If your hands clasp, or if your fingers can easily touch, then your flexibility is good.

**Head turns.** Full range of motion in the neck enables you to do things like back your car out of a parking space with ease. To perform, have someone stand behind you as you sit up straight in a chair and rotate your head to the right. Ask them to note how much of your profile is visible. Return to center and rotate your head to the left. Repeat the profile check. Your profile should be visible and equal on both sides. If not, it may be time to begin stretching exercises.

**Heart rate recovery.** The more fit you are, the more quickly your heart rate returns to normal after exertion. Engage in moderately intense exercise and when you're finished, count your heart rate for 60 seconds. Follow this by standing still for one minute, then rechecking your pulse for 60 seconds. A difference of at least 20 beats is good.

**One legged stand.** Possessing good balance helps you to react quickly and with agility. It prevents falls and injuries too. Being steady on your feet becomes even more crucial as you age because it's a determining factor in maintaining independence. Simply stand on one leg without holding onto anything or hopping around. Be sure to do this next to a wall in case you wobble. If you can't hold your balance for at least 60 seconds, start practicing.

**Push up and hold.** Core strength is the focal point of this check. Your core doesn't consist solely of your abs. Neglecting the other muscles actually weakens your core. Core exercises need to target the muscles in your back, pelvis, hips, and abdomen. Together they power your balance, stability, and posture.

To assess the strength of your center, assume a full push-up position with arms completely extended (straight). Holding this position for over 90 seconds is rated as good, 60 to 90 seconds is fair, and less than 60 seconds is poor.

So – how did you measure up?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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