

# FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE

## FAST FACTS

- According to the US Centers for Disease Control, a few lifestyle factors cause most chronic diseases. These factors are tobacco use, poor nutrition, too little physical activity, and alcohol overuse.<sup>1</sup>
- Functional medicine is a type of integrative medicine that focuses on nutritional and environmental approaches to addressing physical and mental health issues.<sup>2</sup>
- Functional medicine practitioners seek to treat the nutritional and metabolic causes of disease rather than treating the symptoms of a particular disease.<sup>3</sup>
- The American Heart Association released a statement for health care professionals stressing the importance of self-care/lifestyle approaches in the management cardiovascular disease and stroke.<sup>4</sup>
- Most of the illness, disability, and death in the U.S. is the result of chronic disease, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and obesity. Lifestyle changes can prevent deaths and reduce health care costs for all these conditions and more.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT IS FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE?

Functional medicine physicians believe that disease is caused by complex relationships among genetic, environmental and lifestyle factors, and that these relationships can be modified through changes in nutrition and behavior. Practitioners take a whole health approach as opposed to focusing on a single factor or condition.<sup>6</sup>

The conventional approach to medicine is to prescribe medicine or treatment for a specific condition or diagnosis. In functional medicine, the physician will work to find

the underlying causes of your condition(s) and consider behaviors or environmental conditions you can change. It is common for functional medicine physicians to include health coaching and nutritional counseling as part of the treatment plan.

## WHAT CONDITIONS DO FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE PRACTITIONERS TREAT?

Functional medicine is used to treat both physical and mental health conditions and symptoms. These include:

- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Metabolic syndrome
- Fibromyalgia
- Chronic fatigue
- Autoimmune diseases
- Functional disorders
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Stress related disorders
- Arthritis
- Excess weight and slow metabolism
- Migraines and headaches
- Digestive disease
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Dementia
- Hormonal disorders
- Heavy metal toxicity
- Mold exposure
- Food/environmental allergies

## Functional medicine and cancer

The emphasis functional medicine places on the whole body system is especially important in cancer care. Nutrition, gut health, the microbiome, sleep, stress reduction and supportive care can all help relieve symptoms of cancer treatment, help survivors thrive and avoid recurrence, and may help cancer treatment or speed recovery.

A functional medicine practitioner can help you support and strengthen your body and boost your mental health. Functional medicine does not treat cancer directly, but an integrative oncologist can help you choose functional medicine approaches to coping with cancer. Visit [www.cancerchoices.org](http://www.cancerchoices.org) to learn more.

## Is there evidence that functional medicine works?

In the last 30 years, as health care providers and patients focus more on whole health, more research has been done to explore how lifestyle changes can affect health. Some examples are:

- Women with fatigue, stress and digestive disorders who engaged in a functional medicine approach called the Kalish method for 28 weeks experienced a 38% average decrease in fatigue, a 27% average decrease in stress, and a 22 percent average decrease in confusion.<sup>7</sup>
- A meta-analysis of adults with a high risk of developing diabetes found that lifestyle interventions similar to but not identical with functional medicine approaches (such as diet changes and exercise) successfully reduced diabetes incidence, and this effect was seen years after the intervention had ended.<sup>8</sup>
- Research studies have found that lifestyle interventions, including diet modifications and exercise, are an effective strategy for pregnant women suffering from gestational diabetes.<sup>9</sup> People with anxiety and/or depression who received a lifestyle intervention focused on diet modification and increasing physical activity saw their anxiety, depression and stress related symptoms decrease.<sup>10</sup> Patients in a 12-week study of inflammatory arthritis reported less pain and better physical and mental health after using a functional medicine treatment approach than patients who did not use functional medicine.<sup>11</sup>
- Intensive functional medicine-based lifestyle changes improved cognitive function in one study of people with early Alzheimer dementia or mild cognitive impairment.<sup>12</sup>

## Information for patients and clinicians

### Websites

If you or your health care provider would like to explore more research on functional medicine's impact on a particular health concern, visit [www.ifm.org/health-topics](http://www.ifm.org/health-topics)

If you are interested in functional medicine for cancer treatment, visit [Functional Medicine in Cancer Care](#) at Cancer Choices. The Body Terrain handbooks can also be helpful.

### Medical and Nursing Journal Articles

A review of functional medicine's history and principles can be found in these articles:

- Bland JS. Functional Medicine *Past, Present, and Future*. Integr Med (Encinitas). 2022 May;21(2):22-26. PMID: 35698609; PMCID: PMC9173848.
- Sager, Brigitte DNP, FNP-C, NC-BC, AFMC, CNE. Functional Medicine in Nursing. AJN, American Journal of Nursing 124(10):p 32-40, October 2024. | DOI: 10.1097/01.NAJ.0001063812.69063.b1

## Are there precautions, side effects or safety concerns I should be aware of before I pursue functional medicine?

Functional medicine is widely considered a safe way of addressing physical and mental conditions when delivered by a certified functional medicine practitioner.

As when you work with any physician, you may experience side effects from a specific treatment plan. Talk to your functional medicine doctor if this happens.

It is common for a functional medicine doctor or dietician to make suggest changes to your diet. You may have some digestive issues while your body adjusts.

You may also experience discomfort or anxiety with the number of diagnostic tests recommended, such as blood tests.

## How often should I seek treatment from a functional medicine practitioner? How long is each session?

How often and for how long you see your functional medicine doctor depends on why you need and want their help. Besides doctor's appointments, you will probably also have tests, including blood tests. Your functional medicine specialist may also refer you to a registered dietician, nutrition counselor, or exercise specialist who can help you adjust your diet and current level of physical activity.

## What training and certifications do functional medicine clinicians need?

To be certified as a functional medicine clinician, you must be a licensed medical, naturopathic, osteopathic or chiropractic doctor. Certification is open to doctors of all disciplines. Other health care providers can also qualify for certification, including dentists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, registered nurses, registered dietitians, acupuncturists, and pharmacists.

There are extensive educational requirements to be certified as a functional medicine physician, including taking and passing an Applying Functional Medicine in Clinical Practice (AFMCP) course and classes in six additional modules.

## How do I find a functional medicine practitioner near me?

- The Institute for Functional Medicine: [www.ifm.org/find-a-practitioner](http://www.ifm.org/find-a-practitioner)

## How much will seeing a functional medicine practitioner cost me?

The cost depends on location, provider and services needed. How much you will pay out of pocket to see a functional medicine practitioner will depend on your insurance coverage. The first visit

can cost several hundred dollars in addition to the cost of blood and lab work, which can add up quickly. Follow-up visits are less costly.

### Will my insurance company cover the cost of seeing a functional medicine practitioner?

Whether your insurance company covers functional medicine, and how much, depends on your individual policy. Most companies will cover the cost of seeing a functional medicine practitioner if they are a licensed practitioner in that state – but not always.

Some of the blood and other tests may be covered, but many may not be. This is because functional medicine physicians often order tests that go beyond usual medical coverage. The best way to find out whether your insurance company covers functional medicine is to contact them and ask about both the provider and the tests they plan to order.

Additionally, it is common for a functional medicine practitioner to refer you to specialists such as a dietician or health coach.

These may not be covered. Again, contact your insurance company to learn what they will cover.

### Should I tell my primary care physician that I am seeing a functional medicine clinician?

Yes. It is important to let your primary care physician and any other health care providers know that you would like to use functional medicine for your medical condition or concern. You may need to have some of your medications or other treatments adjusted, and all your doctors and health care providers should know what the others are doing or prescribing. This helps you stay as safe and healthy as possible. Open communication helps you avoid complications and allows all your health care providers to work together to address your condition.

### My notes and questions

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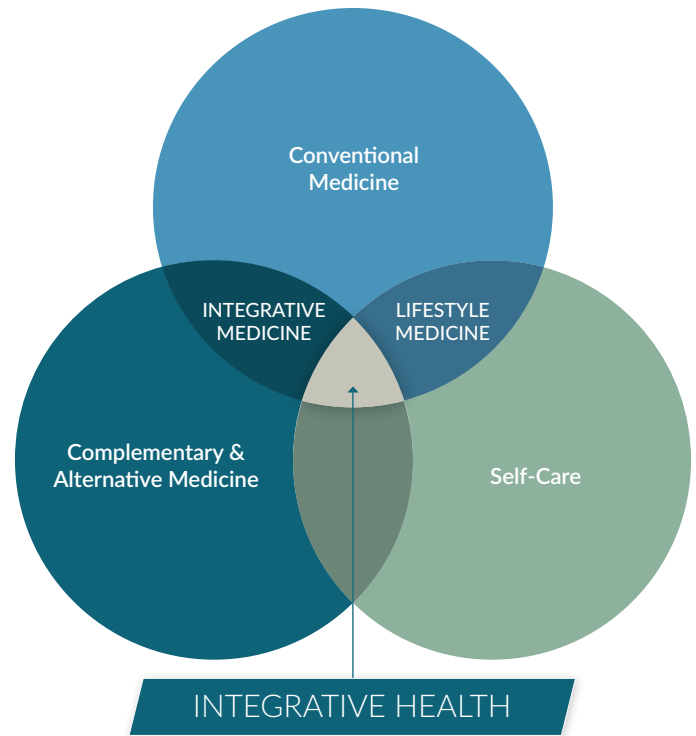
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