

## WHAT IS FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE?

by Dr. Kendall Guyer Ritz, MD

Many people who have explored healthcare options outside of their primary care physician are familiar with terms such as *alternative medicine* and *integrative medicine*, broad terms that encompass a wide variety of unrelated modalities that in some way promote health and vitality. *Functional medicine*, in contrast, is a specific approach to optimal health which has a steadily growing following among physicians and other healthcare practitioners. The *Textbook of Functional Medicine* defines functional medicine as “dedicated to prevention, early assessment, and improved management of complex, chronic disease by intervening at multiple levels to correct core clinical imbalances and thereby restore each patient’s functionality and health to the greatest extent possible.”

Health itself can mean different things to different people, ranging from an optimal state of vitality to the mere absence of diagnosable disease. This range in definition is analogous to the idea of health and disease as existing upon a continuum, where optimal health represents one end while severe, debilitating disease represents the other. One can move along the continuum either in the direction of health or towards disease. Taking this one step further, if you have optimal health at one end and disease at the other, there is a large gray zone in between which may represent symptoms one experiences that have not yet crossed the threshold of a diagnosable disease or even physiological abnormalities which exist within the body that have not yet begun to cause symptoms. This is the area targeted by functional medicine- those altered physiological processes that are moving one away from health and, if left to continue without intervention, will eventually lead to symptoms and, beyond that, to a diagnosable disease. In other words, practitioners of functional medicine seek to identify any dysfunction in the body that is moving one towards disease and to intervene to move one in the direction of optimal health.

Functional medicine as an approach to the management of complex, chronic disease is based on the combined teachings of such pioneers as Linus Pauling, Archibald Garrod, Hans Selye, and others. Today, functional medicine is largely promoted by the Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM), a non-profit educational organization. This is done through systematically evaluating both established and current research and educating physicians on how to apply relevant findings to clinical practice. In addition, IFM attempts to promote functional medicine on a larger scale through communications with policy makers, practitioners, educators, researchers, and the public. More information on the Institute for Functional Medicine can be found by going to their website, [www.functionalmedicine.org](http://www.functionalmedicine.org).

Functional medicine looks for the root cause of disease. This is a very different approach when compared to making a diagnosis and administering interventions to treat symptoms without addressing the underlying or root dysfunction occurring within the body. This is not to say that functional medicine does not utilize diagnostic tools, but rather focuses on finding the underlying dysfunctional process or processes leading to a given diagnosis towards which treatment can be targeted.

In addition, functional medicine recognizes the biochemical individuality of each patient. In other words, the cause of obesity in one individual may be very different from the cause in another and is based upon each individual’s environment, lifestyle, and genetic predispositions. As such, functional medicine promotes that every patient be evaluated in the context of their

unique circumstances in order to effectively treat their dysfunction and get them moving back towards health.

The functional medicine approach is a more holistic approach to health promotion that is anchored in the basic sciences and emerging research. There are six core imbalances that functional medicine seeks to address which represent the basic core causes of most health problems. These include:

- Hormonal and neurotransmitter imbalances
- Oxidation-reduction imbalances
- Detoxification imbalances
- Immune and inflammatory imbalances
- Digestive imbalances
- Structural imbalances

The functional medicine approach to such imbalances includes extensive history taking and physical exam, as well as specialized laboratory testing based on an individual's specific needs. Imbalances are then treated with specific interventions which may include dietary changes, nutritional supplementation, physical activity, stress management, detoxification, hormonal manipulation, and structural modalities such as osteopathy or acupuncture. Treatments are tailored to each patient's needs and preferences in a dynamic manner based upon their willingness to participate and their response to treatment.

Functional medicine, although its principles and core approach have been firmly established, remains a new and evolving approach to optimal health. It provides both patients and practitioners the opportunity to explore and identify underlying dysfunction in a holistic manner. It also recognizes and promotes the critical importance of various lifestyle interventions in balancing the body to achieve health and vitality, which for many may translate into a longer, healthier life. In summary, functional medicine seeks to improve quality of life by preserving health- not only adding years to your life but life to your years.

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