

Functional Rehabilitation

Condition: Functional rehabilitation combines various techniques in an attempt to return an injured athlete or worker to an optimal level of performance.

Background: The functional rehabilitation program includes strength, flexibility, and agility training as well as training focused on coordination of body parts and motion to prepare the individual to return to full participation.

Risk Factors: Typically, functional rehabilitation has been applied to sports medicine, but this approach is also beneficial for individuals returning to work or basic activities of daily living after traumatic injuries or even neurological injuries strokes.

History and Symptoms: History of the injury, including previous injuries, treatments, and recovery, is useful as the initial step. Understanding the patient's goals and plans to return to sports or activities is helpful. Knowledge of current level of function, presence of a support system, use of medications or supplements, and what positions or movements reduce or increase pain is also important.

Physical Exam: A physical examination will be performed by a physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician to assess reflexes, posture, balance, walking, muscle control, body stabilization during rest and movement, range of motion of joints, and any deficiencies or problems that may have contributed to the original injury.

Diagnostic Process: Functional rehabilitation requires functional diagnostics, such as a PM&R physician reviewing the athlete's techniques, movement capabilities, and secondary adaptation changes to other joints or muscles; however, imaging, such as X-ray, CT, or MRI, may be used to clarify the particular problem or injury. Ultrasound imaging can also be used to assess the movement of joints and muscles.

Rehab Management: The overall goal of functional rehabilitation is to train the patient using three-dimensional movements to prepare the whole body to return to daily activities or sports. This differs from therapies used to address the patient's symptoms using such modalities as heat, ice, and medication while mainly strengthening the isolated injured muscle. The athlete should begin rehabilitation as soon as the injury allows, and rehabilitation, which should be injury-specific, may follow a multi-phase program that involves progressive steps from controlling inflammation and pain to restoration of motion to development of muscle strength, power, and endurance to return to sport-specific activity. A team approach should involve rehabilitation physicians, physical therapists, athletic trainers, and strength and conditioning coaches.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Patient's families and coaches should be educated about the training required for restoration of full function and for avoiding re-injury, as treatment failure often stems from returning to competition before full recovery.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.