

Functional Medicine FAQs

What's the biggest difference between conventional and functional medicine?

Conventional medical schools train doctors to diagnose a disease and then assign a drug or surgery to correct it, says Kristi Hughes, ND, a naturopathic physician who practices functional medicine. For instance, many patients with heart disease have narrowing of the arteries that supply blood to the heart. A common approach is to insert stents in the arteries to prop them open and maintain blood flow.

The same issue, if approached by someone trained in functional medicine, would likely instigate a conversation with the patient about what environmental, genetic, and lifestyle factors may be contributing to a narrowing of the arteries. After all, numerous functions — poor diet, inactivity, hormonal imbalances, chronic inflammation — can have an impact on blood flow to the heart.

The conventional-medicine approach, says Hughes, “is doomed to fail in an era of chronic disease like the one we are in today. Rather, physicians must strive to identify and treat the underlying causes of illness, engage patients in a therapeutic partnership to co-create a plan for health and healing, and support behavior changes through empowering and educating patients on wellness care.”

What's the difference between functional and integrative medicine?

The difference between functional medicine and

integrative medicine is subtle but meaningful. While all functional medicine is integrative (meaning it's open to integrating both conventional and alternative methods), not all integrative healthcare practices are functional.

An integrative doctor may be a family practitioner with an interest in Chinese medicine or an osteopath who incorporates homeopathy into his practice. That's fine, but it's not functional medicine, says David Jones, MD, president of the Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM), who likens the distinction to your computer: Functional medicine would be the operating system running in the background, while integrative approaches, like acupuncture and homeopathy, are like specific apps running in the foreground without an operating system connecting them.

Why haven't I heard of functional medicine?

The short answer is, you will. The long answer is that altering the course of conventional medicine is like turning a big ship: It takes a while. Functional medicine started in the early 1990s as the brainstorm of a few doctors frustrated with a medical system that expected them to treat chronic disease with pills and surgeries. Now, functional medicine has its own epicenter, the IFM. So far, more than 100,000 practitioners from 73 countries have been introduced to the principles and practices of functional medicine. Faculties from 30 percent of all medical schools in the United States

have enrolled in continuing-education courses. One of the group's goals is to incorporate functional medicine into medical-school curricula so that the next generation of doctors will be able to treat chronic diseases successfully.

To that end, the University of Miami worked with the IFM to come up with a dedicated functional-medicine and clinical-nutrition curriculum for doctors in the IFM program, which is in its third year of use. And IFM graduated its first class of certified functional-medicine practitioners recently.

How does one become a functional-medicine practitioner?

Functional medicine is not a standalone degree. Think of it more as a postgrad certification. Physicians, osteopaths, chiropractors, nurses, naturopaths, nutritionists, and others can attend functional-medicine courses to build on their training and as part of the larger continuing-education requirements needed to keep their licenses up to date.

A five-day introductory course in functional medicine is the first step. Here, professionals learn the underlying philosophies, diagnostic systems, and protocols for identifying and treating the root causes of disease. Then practitioners can attend specialized three-day seminars on topics such as cardiology, immunology, gastroenterology, hormonal balance, detoxification, and energy regulation.

How much does it cost to see a functional-medicine professional?

In addition to lab costs and follow-up appointments, expect to pay \$200 to \$400 for an initial consult. Be forewarned: Even if you can find a practitioner who takes your health insurance plan (some functional-medicine practitioners do not), the out-of-pocket expenses for supplements and tests can sometimes be prohibitive.

Most major health-insurance companies won't pay for lab tests above and beyond a standard protocol. For instance, they'll often cover basic blood work, such as white blood cell counts, cholesterol levels, or blood-glucose levels, but not a stool test for parasites or urine test for hormone levels. (See “Basic Tests Used in Functional Medicine,” page 68, for common tests and prices.) While a functional approach may cost more up front, many patients find it well worth the money — both because they get better results, and because they avoid the side effects and quality-of-life sacrifices associated with many conventional pharmaceutical and surgical interventions.

How do I find a functional-medicine doctor?

Start by searching the IFM's website (www.functionalmedicine.org), but note that the site merely provides an unvetted list of practitioners who have completed the five-day introductory course. So, once you find practitioners near you, be sure to check out their websites for more info.