

Back to Basics: The Functional Approach

By Jan Clementson

Freedom of Choice and Individuality

Would you run a marathon without doing any training? Would you climb Everest without any climbing equipment? For most people, the obvious answer would be “no”, but for some the answer would be “maybe” and for others the answer would be “yes”. Rightly or wrongly, which ever way you perceive it, this is individuality.

We are all biochemically individual, with individual physiological variations in responses to the environment and with unique nutritional needs.¹ “One man’s medicine is another man’s poison” also holds true in Sports Nutrition, where research has shown that supplementation can produce favourable results in some, neutral effects in others and detrimental effects in yet others.²

If you knew your food choices were hindering your progress would you change?



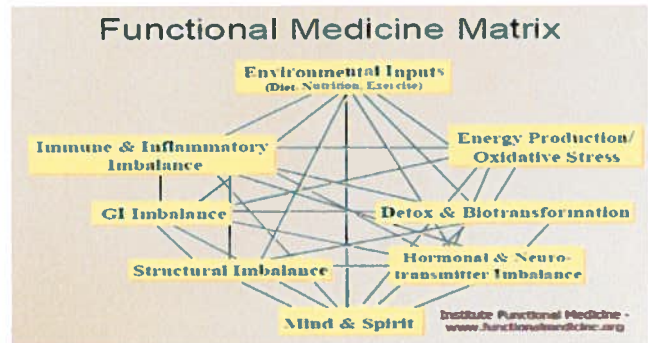
The Dietetic Model vs Functional Medicine

The prevailing authority for Sports Nutrition is the dietetic model – a practical discipline that analyses the nutritional adequacy of an athlete’s diet based on training demands. This is exemplified by The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) Position Statement.³ This model works well for Performance Nutrition as it considers on an individual basis the number of calories required for the specific sport; the appropriate ratios between the macro-nutrients; food and drink timings; and micro-nutrient intakes.

However, this model fails to prioritise the functional aspects of health over Performance Nutrition. Functional Medicine, on the other-hand, uses a ‘systems-orientated’ approach that considers the individual’s history, physiology, lifestyle and environmental factors that influence health and disease.⁴ It involves an integrative concept, which recognises that if one area of your health is imbalanced, the chances are that other areas will be affected also.

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Every system, organ and cell in your body is connected. What affects one part will have an effect on another part. For example, if you have an imbalance in your gastrointestinal tract, this will affect your immunity because your main immune organ is located in your gut. When you consider that 30-65% of long-distance runners experience gastrointestinal disturbances and symptoms,⁵ then it is easy to understand how immunity can easily become impaired in the athlete.

The Athlete’s Nutritional Pyramid

The Functional Medicine approach focuses on three levels of dietary support: Functional Nutrition for Health; Performance Nutrition; and Supplements. This is the model used by the Athletes Performance Institute in the US⁶ and is the model being adopted by UK Nutritionists.



Get the Basics Right First

Focus on eating for health and wellbeing first before considering Performance Nutrition or Supplements. Understand and apply the basic principles of effective hydration, and the need for both the macro and micro-nutrients. These will be discussed in further detail over the coming months.

Jan Clementson has a First Class Honours Degree in Nutritional Medicine and works as a Clinical Nutrition Advisor for BioCare Ltd.
Contact: janclementson@hotmail.com

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References

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² Greenhaff P et al (1994). Effect of oral creatine supplementation on skeletal phosphocreatine resynthesis. **Am J Physiol**, 266: E725-30.

³ American College of Sports Medicine, American Dietetic Association and Dieticians of Canada (2000). Joint Position Statement – Nutrition and Athletic Performance. **Med Sci Sports Exerc**, 32(12): 2130-45.

⁴ The Institute for Functional Medicine (2013). What is Functional Medicine? www.functionalmedicine.org [Accessed 01/11/13].

⁵ Simons & Kenedy (2004) Gastrointestinal Problems in Runners. **Current Science, Inc ISSN**, 3: 112-6.

⁶ Carlson 2006. Athlete's Performance Nutrition Programme: Bridging Science & Reality. **Int Society of Sports Nutrition**. Las Vegas, USA.