What is Functional Medicine?

Most of you know the routine when you go to the doctor. Your doctor diagnoses the condition at hand, prescribes a treatment to alleviate your symptoms, and you go on your way. But there's an approach to medicine that goes beyond this approach to Western medicine.

The goal is to get to the root cause of what might be contributing to your health concerns. This approach is known as functional medicine, and it's growing in popularity as people begin to seek more profound answers about their overall health and well-being.

**How does functional medicine accomplish this?**

According to the Institute for Functional Medicine, functional medicine is a "systems biology-based approach that focuses on identifying and addressing the root cause of disease. Each symptom or differential diagnosis may be one of many contributing to an individual's illness." What this means in practice is that a functional medicine doctor is not just interested in treating the symptoms, only for you to return with a different, related problem a few weeks or months later. Instead,
the doctor is focused on understanding your whole health. That will allow them to get to the root cause of the health problems you are experiencing.

"We believe in the body's intrinsic capacity to heal, and it's our job as physicians to uncover what's preventing that from happening," says Karen Koffler, M.D., medical director of the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine with the University of Miami Health System. "Is it excess sugar? Excess inflammation? Increased gut permeability? Understanding that symptoms are just the starting point of what is going on, our job is to identify the upstream cause of those symptoms and treat that so that we are not simply chasing symptoms."

What happens during a functional medicine appointment?

Expect to spend more time with the functional medicine physician than you typically would, especially during your first couple of visits. "My patients describe in detail many aspects of their lifestyle so that I understand how the way they are living may influence what they are feeling," she says.

- How, when, what, and why do you eat?
- How do you sleep?
- What have been the stressors you have lived through?"

"One of the reasons I spend so much time on this is that I want people to appreciate that all these things matter. All of it plays into how our health evolves over time."

According to Dr. Koffler, the roots of many people's chronic health issues often result from an interplay of three causes:

Genetics, environment, and lifestyle choices.

As a result, some treatments may be diet and lifestyle-based as the doctor begins to
identify your issues. For example, the American Osteopathic Association says that functional medicine specialists may utilize nutrigenomics, a dietary approach that looks at how specific nutrients impact your genes and overall health.

"Functional medicine and conventional medicine work together side by side," says Dr. Koffler.

Functional medicine does not refute the value of traditional Western medicine, says Dr. Koffler. Rather, functional medicine specialists see the two practices as partners who play an essential role in treating your medical ailments.

"Functional medicine isn't meant for acute issues, like a fractured leg or a heart attack," she says. "That's where conventional medicine truly shines. And conventional training is critical in appreciating how the body works. But when it comes to the prevention of health issues and addressing chronic diseases, functional medicine, because of its more expanded lens, can augment a conventional approach and offer patients more insight and more tools to improve their health."

If you're interested in getting started on your functional medicine journey, schedule an appointment with Dr. Koffler or one of her colleagues at the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Miami Health System.

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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