

# Functional Medicine in Nursing

Transforming patient outcomes through holistic care

## ABSTRACT

Functional medicine is a patient-centered approach that seeks to address the underlying causes of disease rather than focusing on managing the symptoms. This article explains the core principles of functional medicine and explores the potential for nurses to learn and incorporate functional medicine into their practice. By adopting a functional medicine approach, nurses can promote a more personalized and collaborative health care environment that can improve patient outcomes and empower patients to take an active role in their own health journey.

**Keywords:** functional medicine, holistic nursing, patient-centered care, root causes, whole person health

The current health care system faces significant challenges. Despite advancements in modern medicine, the prevalence of many chronic health conditions is increasing, with six in 10 adults having arthritis, high blood pressure, or diabetes.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the cardiometabolic health of our species has deteriorated.<sup>2</sup> The incidence rates of some of the more common cancers are higher,<sup>3</sup> as is the global disease burden of mental illnesses such as depression.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of antinuclear antibodies, biomarkers of autoimmunity, has grown in recent years, as has the incidence of some autoimmune disorders. This begs the question: with our vast knowledge and cutting-edge interventions, why is illness increasing? Research suggests that a combination of genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors contributes to disease, and to be successful treatment must address the underlying causes.

Focusing on the root processes that underlie illness means taking a more individualized approach to treatment. However, patients report that our complex health care system often lacks the personalized care they are seeking. The recent global pandemic has shifted perceptions regarding health care.<sup>5,6</sup> Patients now desire deeper insights into their health and have grown increasingly skeptical of traditional health care approaches. They may feel dismissed if their laboratory results fall within the “normal” range and they do not fit neatly into a diagnostic box. The vast pool of information available on the internet, although it can be beneficial, can also leave patients feeling overwhelmed and

confused. With approximately half of U.S. adults, and 85% of those over 60, taking at least one prescription drug regularly, our reliance on prescription medications to address most health concerns has skyrocketed.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile only one-fourth of U.S. adults meet the physical activity guidelines for exercise, and only about 10% consume adequate servings of fruits and vegetables.<sup>7,9</sup> Furthermore, prescribing providers often feel ill-prepared to counsel patients on effective lifestyle alternatives.<sup>10</sup> With the longstanding focus on “a pill for every ill,” the deeper questions of “Why does this person have these symptoms?” and “How did this come to be?” often remain unanswered.

The good news is that research is advancing faster than ever, enabling truly personalized care plans. Yet, it is disheartening to note that it takes approximately 17 years for new research findings to be incorporated into routine clinical practice.<sup>11</sup> Enter functional medicine, which acts as a bridge between cutting-edge research and current health care delivery methods, and has the potential to revolutionize how care is delivered. This article defines functional medicine, while showcasing holistic methods that address the root causes of illnesses rather than their symptoms. It also explores how nurses can weave these methodologies into their current practice to improve patient outcomes.

## UNDERSTANDING FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE

Functional medicine only gained formal recognition beginning in the late 20th century. It emerged as a

response to the tendency in conventional medicine to prioritize managing symptoms over addressing the root causes of chronic diseases. Key figures like Sidney Baker and Jeffrey Bland have been instrumental in its evolution. Bland, often dubbed the “father of functional medicine,” championed individualized, systems-based health care and founded the nonprofit Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM) in 1991.<sup>12</sup> Since its inception, the IFM has been pivotal in solidifying the principles of functional medicine, emphasizing evidence-based practice, provider education, personalized health care, and patient empowerment.

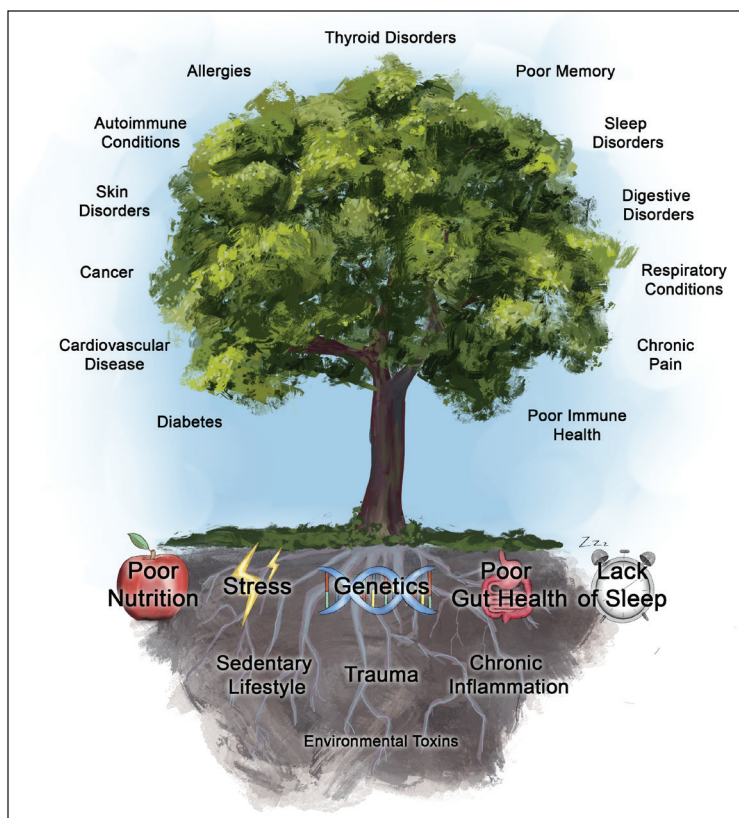
Commonly referred to as root cause medicine, functional medicine transcends traditional medical boundaries. It emphasizes biochemistry; the intricate interplay of body systems; and how lifestyle, environmental, and genetic factors can profoundly influence health.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing that health ranges from optimal well-being to severe chronic illness, functional medicine strives to guide patients toward the pinnacle of this spectrum.

### PRINCIPLES OF FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE

Functional medicine is rooted in several fundamental principles that guide its practice and philosophy<sup>13</sup>:

**Patient-centered approach.** In recent years, the paradigm shift toward patient-centered care and a holistic understanding of health has fueled the demand for functional medicine.<sup>14</sup> Unlike traditional models that may treat patients as passive recipients of information and interventions, functional medicine has at its core a dedication to patient-centered care. Practitioners of functional medicine seek to understand each patient’s health in the context of the patient’s unique background, genetics, way of life, and environmental exposures. With this personalized approach, health care choices are made with the patient’s experiences, preferences, and values in mind. With patients feeling heard and respected, this partnership has the potential to improve patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, and consequently, health outcomes. Research has confirmed that patients are more likely to commit to making healthy changes when they feel they are part of the decision-making process.<sup>15</sup>

**Holistic perspective.** Unlike conventional medicine, which often compartmentalizes the body’s various systems (pulmonary, cardiovascular, and endocrine, for example), functional medicine adopts a more holistic perspective. It recognizes how interconnected and interdependent the body’s systems are and how disruptions in one area can have cascading effects on others.<sup>13</sup> This interconnectedness is central



Functional medicine addresses the root causes of illnesses rather than their symptoms. In this image, the health conditions above the soil line are those that can manifest as a result of imbalances occurring below the soil line. Illustration by Regan Donovan.

to understanding the underlying causes of disease and developing comprehensive treatment strategies.

**Focus on underlying causes.** As they endeavor to identify and address the root causes of health imbalances rather than focusing on alleviating symptoms, functional medicine practitioners aim to provide long-lasting solutions that promote sustainable healing. Because a single root cause may impact multiple body systems, functional medicine patients often report improvement in many areas of their health rather than in one single body system or for one diagnosis.

**Health as positive vitality.** Functional medicine seeks to identify opportunities to optimize wellness long before the onset of illness and does not wait for diagnosable disease to intervene. It recognizes that true health extends beyond the absence of illness, emphasizing the importance of preventative strategies and lifestyle changes to enhance overall well-being. This approach empowers individuals to lead more vital, fulfilling lives by addressing the root causes of health issues and promoting proactive

health management. In contrast, traditional health care often overlooks the early signs of potential health problems, particularly when patients exhibit unhealthy lifestyles, poor diets, or high stress levels without meeting the clinical criteria for chronic conditions. This results in missed opportunities for early intervention and education, which could prevent the progression of cardiometabolic health disorders and other diseases. Functional medicine challenges this norm by asking critical questions about the barriers to wellness and advocating for early, personalized interventions to support the body's natural resilience and capacity for healing.

**Evidence-based practice.** While functional medicine strongly emphasizes individualized care, it remains grounded in evidence-based practices. Integrating cutting-edge scientific research and clinical expertise ensures that interventions are safe and effective. It is common in our analysis of research studies to view those with a larger number of participants as more respectable and universally applicable in practice, and it is important to acknowledge that there are rarely large studies to validate functional medicine.<sup>16</sup> Generally, large-scale studies focus on one health condition and apply one intervention to a large population of participants, with or without a control arm. If we consider hypertension, for instance, we can see why a large hypertension study is less feasible in functional medicine. For example, given a cohort of 1,000 patients with a diagnosis of hypertension, each one may have a different underlying cause of the disease. Accordingly, some may improve by addressing untreated sleep apnea, and others by addressing a magnesium deficiency, a high-stress lifestyle, a food reaction, or any one of many other potential root causes.<sup>17</sup> This scenario highlights the likelihood that one intervention would not be able to be proven effective in treating hypertension. By contrast, it is possible to use smaller cohort studies to validate functional medicine practices, as patients may be grouped into cohorts with others who have the same root cause.<sup>10, 18-20</sup>

## FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE IN PRACTICE

With a few key guiding principles, functional medicine takes a unique approach to patient care.

**Personalized assessment.** A functional medicine evaluation often begins with a comprehensive intake and assessment of the patient's medical history, lifestyle, genetic makeup, and environmental exposures.<sup>13</sup> This thorough evaluation enables practitioners to identify potential triggers and contributors to a patient's unique health imbalances, paving the way for tailored interventions. Many functional medicine practitioners use a timeline to trace a patient's health story, offering both the provider and the patient a chronological perspective on health from birth onward.<sup>21</sup>

**Laboratory testing.** Unlike the black-and-white approach of traditional health care, which labels laboratory results as falling within or outside standard reference ranges, functional medicine focuses on achieving an optimal range. It should be noted that laboratories determine reference ranges based on the average local population, which results in ranges that may not represent optimal metabolic health.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, rather than waiting for a clear disease marker, functional medicine practitioners advocate for preventive care. There is much to be gained from supporting a patient in this manner. A closer look reveals that many chronic illnesses exist within normal reference ranges of patients' everyday blood work, a finding that also highlights the many opportunities to prevent disease and optimize patient outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

For example, current guidelines do not encourage practitioner intervention until fasting blood glucose exceeds 100 mg/dL on two separate occasions, or until glycated hemoglobin is similarly elevated, despite an optimal fasting blood glucose being closer to 70 mg/dL.<sup>23</sup> Often, patients present to functional medicine practitioners with poor metabolic health after years of fasting blood glucose in the range of 90 to 100 mg/dL and having been told by their conventional practitioners that their laboratory work is normal. This is an excellent example of a frequently missed opportunity to promote wellness and provide health education to prevent disease development *before* patients meet diagnostic criteria for a prescription medication.

It is often said in functional medicine that the increased prevalence of nearly every chronic health condition is not due to a lack of prescription medications, elaborate testing, or even supplements; instead, worsening health outcomes are the result of the modern lifestyle. Because the primary target of functional medicine tends to be the modern lifestyle, many functional medicine practitioners use little or no laboratory work to help patients achieve improved outcomes; they focus instead on increasing patients' awareness of the impact of their lifestyle on their health. Beyond traditional blood work, some functional medicine practitioners choose to employ specialized laboratory tests that delve deeper into physiological functions and imbalances. These tests provide insights into nutritional deficiencies, hormonal imbalances, immune dysregulation, and gut health that may not be apparent through standard testing.

**Genetic considerations.** It is a common misconception that individuals inevitably inherit their health conditions. Because they assume they will experience a similar fate as their parents and grandparents simply because of their genes, patients are often complacent regarding their lifestyle choices. The truth is that we activate our genes through our lifestyle, food choices, and environmental expo-

tures.<sup>24</sup> More commonly, we inherit the health habits of our predecessors, and we tend to activate our genes in a similar manner. Therefore, we are at a similar risk of genetically linked health concerns unless we make different choices from those of previous generations. Those who believe that their genetic makeup determines the state of their health may feel a genuine sense of empowerment and hope after having the process fully explained to them by a trusted health care professional.

Nonetheless, genetic predispositions can definitely influence an individual's susceptibility to certain health conditions.<sup>25</sup> More advanced functional medicine testing can include a genetic analysis to better understand how an individual's genetic makeup interacts with lifestyle and environmental factors, allowing for personalized recommendations and interventions. Research is emerging at a rapid rate that explores the genetic considerations for approaching numerous health conditions, and this will continue to be a growing field.<sup>25</sup>

**Lifestyle modification.** Functional medicine underscores the critical impact of lifestyle factors—diet, physical activity, stress management, sleep, and environmental exposures—on health outcomes, promoting patient empowerment by encouraging informed decisions and healthier behaviors. Because so many health concerns are the result of the modern lifestyle, focusing on lifestyle factors in a personalized manner addresses root causes and can significantly alleviate symptoms for many patients.

**Complementary therapies.** Functional medicine embraces a range of evidence-based complementary therapies that enhance conventional medical approaches. These therapies include acupuncture, herbal medicine, massage, breathwork, mindfulness, yoga, essential oils, and many other evidence-based modalities that promote healing.<sup>26</sup>

**Collaborative care.** Recognizing the complexity of health issues, functional medicine practitioners collaborate closely with other health care professionals to provide comprehensive care. Interdisciplinary communication and teamwork ensure that patients receive well-rounded and coordinated treatment plans. A patient-centered team may include conventional practitioners, complementary therapy specialists, mental health practitioners, and other appropriate health experts.

By integrating these principles into practice, functional medicine practitioners can address the root causes of disease and promote optimal health and well-being.

## THE '5R APPROACH' IN FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE

At the heart of functional medicine is the "5R approach," a systematic and patient-centered framework designed to restore health by addressing underlying imbalances and dysfunctions.<sup>27</sup>

**Remove.** The first step in the 5R approach, often considered the most impactful step, is generally geared toward identifying and removing any factors that may be contributing to the patient's health issues. This includes eliminating potential allergens, pathogens, toxins, and other triggers that could be disrupting normal bodily functions. Removal often involves dietary modifications, lifestyle changes, and the avoidance of environmental toxins.

**Replace.** After the remove step, it is essential to replace what is missing or deficient. This typically involves replacing the essential nutrients, enzymes, or hormones that may be lacking in the body. In many cases, these nutrients are absent in a patient's diet due to poor food quality or impaired digestion or absorption. Although long-term nutritional supplements are not necessarily a focus of functional medicine, nutritional deficiencies can be addressed by customized supplementation and dietary adjustments. Ideally, patients can get the nutrients their body needs from their diet.

**Reinoculate.** A healthy gut microbiome is essential for overall well-being. At this stage, the focus is on restoring and balancing the gut microbiota, which plays a role in nearly every aspect of our health.<sup>28</sup> This is achieved through the introduction of probiotics (beneficial bacteria), prebiotics (fibers that nourish beneficial bacteria), and other supportive interventions like fermented foods.

**Repair.** To heal damaged tissue and promote optimal function, the fourth R involves tissue repair. Various therapies, including nutraceuticals, herbs, and specific dietary choices, can support the healing process, particularly in the gut lining and other affected tissues. This stage aims to reduce inflammation, enhance tissue regeneration, and support the body's innate healing mechanisms.

**Rebalance.** The final R represents the goal of functional medicine: rebalancing the body's systems and maintaining long-term health. During this stage, practitioners work closely with patients to establish sustainable lifestyle changes, stress management strategies, and ongoing health monitoring. The emphasis is on empowering patients to take control of their health and prevent future imbalances.

The 5R approach serves as a guiding principle in functional medicine, emphasizing personalized care, patient engagement, and addressing the root causes of chronic diseases. This approach has gained recognition for its effectiveness in treating a wide range of chronic conditions, from digestive disorders and autoimmune diseases to hormonal imbalances and cardiometabolic dysfunction.

## APPROACH TO FUNCTIONAL IMBALANCES

The IFM champions a root cause approach that focuses on the identification and healing of functional imbalances within the body. These imbal-



ances, woven into the fabric of the IFM's philosophy,<sup>21</sup> encompass various facets of human physiology, each playing a critical role in overall health. As functional medicine continues to grow in popularity, its focus on identifying and addressing these functional imbalances is reshaping the landscape of health care, emphasizing the importance of personalized, systems-oriented care to reestablish and sustain optimal well-being. The following are the seven categories of functional imbalances:

**Assimilation.** Functional imbalances associated with assimilation include problems with digestion, absorption, microbiota/gastrointestinal health, and respiration. By focusing on these factors, a functional medicine practitioner seeks to uncover disruptions that may impede the body's ability to effectively utilize nutrients and oxygen.

**Defense and repair.** The functional imbalances within the defense and repair category span the immune system, inflammatory response, and infection control, often intertwined with gut microbiota health. Functional medicine acknowledges the importance of maintaining a balanced and responsive defense and repair system to combat threats to health and promote healing.

### Case in Point: A Functional Medicine Approach

The interconnectedness and imbalances of body systems is well illustrated in this case example of a woman experiencing heavy menstrual bleeding. Hormonal imbalances involving estrogen and progesterone can be one of several underlying causes of heavy menstrual bleeding. Left untreated, heavy menses commonly cause microcytic, iron-deficient anemia, which can potentially impact thyroid function (iron is vital for thyroxine to triiodothyronine conversion).<sup>29</sup> Hypothyroid symptoms such as fatigue, depression, weight gain, dry skin, and thinning hair may develop, affecting self-esteem, relationships, and overall well-being. This briefly illustrates the understanding of interconnected body systems that functional medicine encourages.

A woman with heavy menses is less likely to have her upstream hormonal imbalance addressed in a traditional health care setting. She is much more likely to have her symptoms treated individually using thyroid replacement medication or an antidepressant. Meanwhile, her underlying problem goes unidentified and continues to cause issues in other body systems.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, when a woman with complaints of fatigue and heavy menses partners with a functional medicine practitioner, a thorough intake process may reveal the root cause of her stress, poor sleep, suboptimal food choices, nutrient deficiencies, and toxin exposures, as well as other lifestyle factors that may contribute to her hormone imbalance.<sup>31</sup> The functional medicine practitioner can provide education and empowerment for the patient to make appropriate, achievable modifications to her lifestyle that can potentially reverse the heavy menses, iron deficient anemia, and subsequent impaired thyroid function.

**Energy.** Energy-related functional imbalances revolve around the regulation of energy and mitochondrial function. These imbalances play a vital role in determining an individual's energy levels and overall vitality, making them key targets for intervention and optimization. Mitochondrial health and cellular demand are important considerations in functional medicine that are often overlooked in traditional health care.

**Biotransformation and elimination.** In the context of detoxification, functional imbalances encompass the body's ability to efficiently process and eliminate waste. Ensuring the proper functioning of biotransformation processes is paramount to maintaining health and preventing a potentially overwhelming toxic burden on the body. A strong emphasis is placed on hydration, defecation, urination, and perspiration as means of supporting elimination pathways.

**Transport.** Functional imbalances affecting cardiovascular and lymphatic movement can disrupt the efficient circulation of nutrients, oxygen, and waste products throughout the body. The IFM recognizes the significance of these imbalances in overall health and seeks to address them proactively.

**Communication.** Functional imbalances related to communication involve the endocrine system, neurotransmitters, and immune messengers. These imbalances can lead to disruptions in vital signaling pathways, affecting a wide array of bodily functions and potentially contributing to chronic illnesses.

**Structural integrity.** From subcellular membranes to musculoskeletal integrity, maintaining structural integrity is crucial for overall health and mobility. Functional imbalances in this domain can lead to a range of physical issues that impact a patient's quality of life.

For a patient scenario illustrating the functional imbalances and interconnectedness of all body systems that functional medicine seeks to address, see *Case in Point: A Functional Medicine Approach*.<sup>29-31</sup>

### INTEGRATING FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE INTO NURSING PRACTICE

Functional medicine aligns seamlessly with holistic nursing philosophy, and at its core functional medicine truly is holistic nursing care. The American Holistic Nurses Association defines holistic nursing as "all nursing practice that has healing the whole person as its goal."<sup>32</sup> It is the provision of care that considers the patient as a whole and acknowledges the interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of a unique individual's well-being. Therefore, a nurse may be practicing holistically in any nursing role they choose when their methods include considering all aspects of a patient's health, including environment, way of life, and personal beliefs, in addition to the physical symptoms of an illness. Nurses typically learn many

aspects of holistic nursing in their initial nursing training, but our current health care system often relegates nurses to task-oriented, fast-paced clinical roles. Stress, heavy patient assignments, and strained resources can limit a nurse's ability to practice in a more holistic manner. Fortunately, in recent years, there has been a greater shift toward implementing holistic practices that align with the functional medicine approach in every type of health care setting.<sup>14</sup>

According to recent statistics, nurses constitute the largest number of health care professionals and spend the most time with patients, and nursing continues to be voted the most ethical and trusted profession.<sup>33,34</sup> As frontline caregivers and highly skilled patient advocates, nurses can bridge the gap between patients and the conventional health care system, promoting the integration of patient-centered care, holistic approaches, and root cause analysis. The multifaceted role of nurses in functional medicine is highlighted below, as well as the practical aspects of how nurses can seamlessly incorporate the art of holistic nursing practice as functional medicine team members.

**Settings in which a nurse may practice functional medicine.** Nurses can apply functional medicine principles in any nursing role, such as bedside nursing, clinic-based nursing, school nursing, and home health care. By considering patients' well-being in a holistic manner, including genetic, lifestyle, and environmental factors, nurses can develop personalized care plans to address root causes of disease and promote overall health. Although nurses in a functional medicine consulting practice are more likely to have the time to do thorough intakes and offer lengthy one-on-one visits or lead group encounters, there are opportunities to include aspects of functional medicine in even the briefest of patient encounters. For instance, a nurse working in an urgent care facility might educate a returning patient who has recurrent infections orally, in writing, or even through digital resources on supporting immune health from a functional medicine perspective. To promote optimal health, a school nurse can inform children and their families about the advantages of eating a whole food diet, advocate for healthier options in the school cafeteria, and offer support to students dealing with chronic illnesses like diabetes or asthma. In hospital settings, nurses can integrate nutrition and lifestyle considerations into treatment for conditions like congestive heart failure. Embracing functional medicine enhances patient-centered nursing practice across these diverse settings.

**Scope of practice considerations.** Functional medicine encourages nurses to acknowledge the importance of their roles as educators and advocates. Many RNs discovering functional medicine worry that they will need to become NPs to fully

implement functional medicine practices, but there is very little distinction between the RN and NP scopes of practice in functional medicine. In the United States, the scope of practice for both RNs and NPs varies state by state, and patient education is a common theme. Additionally, they both can engage in comprehensive patient assessments, explore root causes of health issues, and devise individualized care plans that encompass lifestyle factors and other functional medicine principles with a focus on patient education and empowerment.

Although an NP may have the authority to provide a medical diagnosis and order laboratory work, an RN can develop nursing diagnoses during their own assessment process. Nurses practicing functional medicine can use the classic nursing processes of assessment, diagnosis, planning, implementation, and evaluation—known as ADPIE—to develop one or more nursing diagnoses and a tailored plan of care that is patient centered and aligns with their patient's personal health goals.<sup>35,36</sup>

**Patient education and empowerment.** Fully within their scope of practice, nurses are well equipped to educate patients on functional medicine concepts and the patient's role in promoting their own well-being. Educating patients on the interconnectedness of lifestyle, genetics, and the environment can empower them to take an active role in managing their health. By explaining the significance of factors such as nutrition, stress management, physical activity, and sleep, nurses can help patients make informed decisions that align with functional medicine principles. Through patient education and empowerment, nurses contribute to cultivating a partnership between patients and health care providers that is central to the success of functional medicine in practice.

**Personalized treatment plans.** Nurses' clinical expertise uniquely positions them to develop and implement personalized treatment plans aligned with functional medicine principles. The foundation of functional medicine lies in understanding patients' history and the lifestyle factors that contribute to their health. Nurses can initiate this process by conducting thorough patient assessments that extend beyond the conventional medical history. By delving into patients' dietary habits, exercise routines, stress levels, sleep patterns, and environmental exposures, nurses gain insights into potential triggers of health imbalances and tailor interventions to meet individual needs. Nurses can help patients set realistic health goals, devise strategies for achieving them, and provide ongoing support. Open and empathetic communication during this assessment enables patients to share their experiences, concerns, and goals, forming the basis for a collaborative care partnership. Through patient education and empowerment, nurses contribute to

cultivating a partnership between patients and health care providers that is aligned with both functional medicine and holistic nursing practice.

**Using functional assessments.** With additional training and depending on their scope of practice, nurses may choose to review conventional laboratory work and integrate functional laboratory results and genetic data into their assessments, enhancing their ability to create individualized care plans. These assessments can encompass a wide range of parameters, such as hormone levels, nutrient deficiencies, immune function, and gut health. Armed with this information, nurses can tailor treatment plans to address specific dysfunctions, leading to more targeted and effective interventions. It should be noted that while an RN is not permitted to order laboratory tests or make a medical diagnosis based on the results, their scope of practice allows for educating patients about the results of those tests, which can increase health awareness.

**Monitoring and evaluation.** Implementing functional medicine interventions is a dynamic patient experience that requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Nurses are vital in tracking a patient's progress by regularly assessing their responses to interventions. By closely monitoring patient outcomes and adjusting treatment plans as needed, nurses ensure that patients receive tailored care that aligns with their evolving health needs and personal goals.

Regular communication with patients allows nurses to gather feedback, address concerns, and fine-tune interventions based on patient experiences. Objective measurements, such as follow-up laboratory tests or symptom assessments, provide quantitative data to gauge the effectiveness of interventions. This ongoing assessment and adjustment process supports the principle of personalized care that lies at the core of both functional medicine and holistic nursing practice.

### **PATHWAYS TO LEARNING FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE FOR NURSES**

Many types of health care practitioners may choose to practice functional medicine, including physicians, nurses, NPs, pharmacists, physician assistants, dietitians, chiropractors, and physical therapists. Education paths vary, with many online programs offering mixed health care practitioner continuing education programs. The founding organization in the movement—the IFM—offers a comprehensive training program that leads to a certification in functional medicine, but there is not yet a board certification in functional medicine specifically for nurses.<sup>37</sup>

When nurses in any health care setting are taking a holistic, patient-centered approach, asking

why and looking for the root cause of their patients' health concerns, they are considered to be practicing functional medicine. But nurses can pursue a more formal approach, including gaining insights into identifying and treating the root cause of health concerns, by participating in a specialized education program that focuses on integrating traditional medical practices with holistic and patient-centered approaches. Nurses may choose to seek out a functional medicine training program with courses taught in the language of nursing, such as those offered by the Integrative Nurse Coach Academy in partnership with the IFM (see [www.inursecoach.com/courses/functional-medicine-for-nurses](http://www.inursecoach.com/courses/functional-medicine-for-nurses)). These are typically continuing education courses and can provide nurses with the knowledge and skills needed to understand the unique biochemical makeup of each patient; the importance of diet and lifestyle in maintaining health; and the use of evidence-based techniques to treat the whole person, not just the symptoms. By obtaining functional medicine training, nurses can deepen their understanding of how environmental, genetic, and lifestyle factors influence patient health, leading to more effective, personalized care plans.

### **CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE**

While the integration of functional medicine into nursing practice offers numerous benefits, it is not without challenges. Nurses must navigate various considerations to effectively incorporate functional medicine principles into their care approach. Below is an exploration of some of the key challenges and considerations that nurses may encounter when implementing functional medicine.

**Limited awareness and education.** Although rapidly growing in popularity and sought after by motivated patients, functional medicine represents a paradigm shift from traditional models, and its principles may not be widely understood. As nurses seek to integrate functional medicine into their practice, they may encounter skepticism or resistance from colleagues who are unfamiliar with its concepts. Additionally, patients may require substantial education to understand the value of a holistic, root cause approach to their health. Addressing this challenge necessitates a commitment to ongoing education and advocacy. Nurses can actively engage in professional development and education opportunities to deepen their understanding of functional medicine concepts. Furthermore, nurses can play a pivotal role in educating their colleagues and patients on the rationale behind functional medicine and its potential benefits for optimizing patient outcomes.

**Time and resource constraints.** Nurses often operate in fast-paced environments with competing demands, making it challenging to conduct

comprehensive patient assessments, interpret functional laboratory results, and devise personalized treatment plans. Furthermore, accessing specialized functional laboratory tests and complementary therapies may pose logistical and financial barriers for nurses and patients alike.

Overcoming these constraints requires strategic planning, prioritizing goals in partnership with patients, and possible resource reallocation. Health care institutions can streamline workflows, provide nurses with additional training and support, and ensure access to necessary resources. Nurses can optimize time management by using interdisciplinary collaboration and technology tools to enhance efficiency in implementing functional medicine approaches.

**Collaboration and interprofessional communication.** To provide comprehensive care, nurses may collaborate closely with a variety of health care providers, such as physicians, dietitians, physical therapists, and complementary therapists. They can also promote the inclusion of complementary therapies and holistic approaches in patient care plans, fostering a cooperative environment that addresses the complex nature of health issues. This collaboration requires clear communication channels and shared decision-making processes.

Challenges may arise in maintaining cohesive interdisciplinary teamwork. Differences in treatment philosophies, communication styles, and priorities can hinder effective collaboration. Overcoming these challenges requires a commitment to mutual respect, open dialogue, and a shared understanding of the principles and objectives of functional medicine. Regular interdisciplinary meetings, case discussions, and the establishment of clear roles and responsibilities can foster a harmonious collaborative environment.

While integrating functional medicine principles into nursing practice offers transformative potential, it also presents challenges that must be navigated thoughtfully. Nurses must actively address limited awareness, consider time and resource constraints, and promote effective collaboration to ensure the successful incorporation of the patient-centered and holistic approach of functional medicine into their care strategies. Fortunately, demystifying health care topics, working within time constraints with limited resources, collaborating as part of a health care team, and communicating effectively in the best interest of their patients are all skills that nurses tend to develop and hone throughout their careers.

## CONCLUSION

Advancements in modern medicine have resulted in truly incredible treatment options, and there is ample evidence confirming the effectiveness of such conventional health care interventions, such

as prescription medications, to treat numerous health concerns. Our traditional medical model has an irreplaceable role in many aspects of health care, such as orthopedics, acute illness, many cancer treatments, and emergent cardiovascular conditions, and functional medicine does not seek to replace these. Still, there is mounting evidence that the holistic approach of functional medicine can address the shortcomings in the current health care system while enhancing the physical and mental well-being of patients.<sup>10</sup> By becoming knowledgeable about functional medicine, nurses can appropriately align their ability to practice holistically, both independently and within a functional medicine team. This alignment promises comprehensive, personalized care that empowers patients to take control of their health with improved outcomes. ▼

For 30 additional nursing continuing professional development activities on multisystem patient care topics, go to [www.nursingcenter.com/ce](http://www.nursingcenter.com/ce).

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