



What's Your Weakness? A Functional Movement Screen May Help Find Out

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How well do you move? It sounds like an easy question—or one that might be answered by your performance on the dance floor. But it's neither. Whether you can perform a deep [squat](#) or leg lift, for example, can indicate areas of the body that are tight or weak and show if you're compensating in a way that might be harmful even if you aren't consciously aware of it. That's the philosophy behind the Functional Movement Screen, a tool used to root out those weaknesses before they hamper your sports performance or become full-fledged [injuries](#).



Video: Arthritis: Pain in Your Joints

Gene Schafer, an athletic trainer, challenged—er, invited—me to take the screening test at the rehab and training facility he owns, ARC Athletics in New York. I was fairly confident I'd ace it. After all, this test doesn't aim to evaluate your athletic performance but "movement patterns that are key to normal function," according to the [FMS website](#). If I run, swim, and strength-train several times a week, surely I've got those basic movement patterns down pat, I thought.

Not really, as I found out. First, I did a deep squat, holding a light pole high above my head, my arms in a V. I thought my squats were perfect, but Schafer noted afterward that while I got pretty close to the ground, my back was tilted too far forward, rather than being straight up and down and parallel to my shins. That, he said, can indicate tight ankles. Sure enough, whenever I've had [foot problems](#) in the past, I've traced the problem to my lower legs.

Next up: I kept the pole but lowered it so that it rested across my shoulders and the back of my neck, then attempted to step over a string set at a height of 18 inches, first with my right foot, then with my left. (Sounds easy, but I had to start and finish the movement with my feet quite close together.) I could tell even as I was doing it that I couldn't complete the step without

sticking my hips out to the side—a possible sign, Schafer said, of tight hip muscles.

I continued with an in-line lunge, which required me to step forward into a lunge, dropping my back knee to the ground, while keeping my feet in line, one behind the other, and holding a pole vertically behind my back with both hands. (You can [see what this and the other exercises look like](#).) I was pretty good at that, though I did wobble; that could signal poor balance or a muscle imbalance in my hips. I scored perfectly on shoulder mobility, which gauged how close I could get my two closed fists by putting my arms behind my back, reaching over one shoulder with one hand and under with the other hand.

We moved on to a [leg raise](#) while lying on my back, to test my hamstring flexibility, and a push-up to assess the stability of my trunk and core muscles. And then we finished up with the fiendishly difficult rotational stability test, requiring me to perch on a 2-inch-by-6-inch beam on my hands and knees, and attempt to touch my elbow to the knee on the same side of the body and then extend my arm and leg. When that failed miserably, I tried touching the elbow to the opposite knee, which was much easier. My difficulty in doing this is a sign of imperfect core strength and stability, Schafer told me.

I left ARC Athletics humbled, to say the least, and also determined to fix my weak spots: increasing the flexibility of my ankles and lower legs, and shaking up my core work. (Schafer gave me a few stretches and exercises to help me out.) In future blogs, I'll experiment with other tests that aim to assess movement, strength, and fitness. If you have any suggestions, please E-mail me at onfitness@usnews.com.

Check it out: *The New York Times's* Phys Ed column examines [what exercise does to your immune function](#) (including a review of experiments that put mice on little mouse-size treadmills). That's Fit highlights either the grossest or most delicious food development of the week, depending on your grease tolerance: [a 1,500-calorie bacon-cheeseburger doughnut](#). And Julie's Health Club [talks to an author about his running rules book](#)—very helpful if you've always wondered how to blow your nose on the run.