

All About Fibromyalgia

by

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Fibromyalgia defined. Associated problems.
Treatment approaches.

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I began this journey of search to write about Fibromyalgia. What a frustrating expenditure of time this has been! It's no wonder that people in pain have such a problem finding people and approaches to help with the nightmare they live in. I will try to make this as informative as I can. I did manage to find that there are treatment centers specific to Fibromyalgia and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Hope is finally arriving for individuals that live with these chronic, painful, life-altering conditions.

What is Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition characterized by long-term, body-wide pain and tender points that can cause intense pain in numerous locations around the body. This generally involves the soft tissues, such as muscles, tendons and ligaments, connective tissues and joints, as well as a syndrome of other symptoms. Doctors have often classified this as Fibromyalgia Syndrome, or FMS, because it characteristically has a group of signs, symptoms, and characteristics that are occurring or intermittently present together. It is more than body pain. In the recent past, Fibromyalgia was also diagnosed as Fibromyositis, Fibrositis, and Muscular Rheumatism. It is presently being classified as a Rheumatology disorder. However, recent findings are considering that it could be an autoimmune disease. Fibromyalgia can develop on its own or along with other musculoskeletal conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis or lupus, which are autoimmune conditions. Fibromyalgia is not considered to be life-threatening, and its symptoms may or may not increase or decrease with time, or there may be exacerbation periods. Quality-of-life questions come into play for many individuals. In the past, very little was understood about this condition and people were either not understood, or not believed. Including by their doctors. But today, answers are coming. Its severity is being recognized and treatment choices are becoming available.

What are the symptoms of Fibromyalgia?

The main symptom of Fibromyalgia is pain all over the body for more than 3 months. It is common for people to experience painful achy muscles that feel tender to the touch, and feeling morning stiffness/soreness. The pain of Fibromyalgia is a "deep" muscle pain and may be described as: aching, soreness, radiating, shooting, stabbing, gnawing, burning, stiff, exhausting, nagging, sharp, intense, unrelenting, almost like an injury, everywhere.

In 1990, the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) listed two primary criteria for the classification of Fibromyalgia. First, there had to be a history of widespread pain involving all four quadrants of the body (right side, left side, above waist, below waist) for a period of at least 3 months. The second criteria from the ACR which points to Fibromyalgia is, upon physical examination, the presence of pain in at least 11 of 18 tender points when touched or pressed with force amounting to the equivalent of 4 kg. or 9 lbs. The many symptoms of Fibromyalgia can vary from mild to severe and may go on for a long time, or a lifetime. Fibromyalgia differs from person to person. The most common complaint is of chronic widespread pain. Beyond that, no two

people with Fibromyalgia have exactly the same signs and symptoms. Some people have only a few, while others have many. The intensity of these symptoms is different in everyone as well, ranging from mildly annoying to highly debilitating. There is pain, and fatigue from pain. Or just - PAIN - .

The pain may not always be the same, from person to person, or in a given time frame. For some people with Fibromyalgia, the pain and stiffness are worst when they wake up and at night, with some degrees of improvement in between. But others have all-day, non-stop 24-hour pain. Non-stop pain like this simply 'wears you down'. For some, the pain gets worse with physical activity, fatigue, stress, illness, or anxiety. There may also be more of a sensitivity to light and temperature, or changes in either or both.

People with Fibromyalgia frequently hurt all over and feel exhausted all the time. Those symptoms can force a person to seriously limit physical activity. A lot of people living with Fibromyalgia have symptoms so severe that they have to quit or modify their jobs. It's also common to have problems with concentration and memory issues. Because Fibromyalgia is frequently misunderstood, family, friends, co-workers and even medical providers may not believe the person is actually sick. A proper diagnosis often takes months, and sometimes years, primarily because there is not a diagnostic test specific for this.

Along with overall pain, people with Fibromyalgia have many specific parts of the body that are extremely tender to the touch - even light touch, also known as tender points.

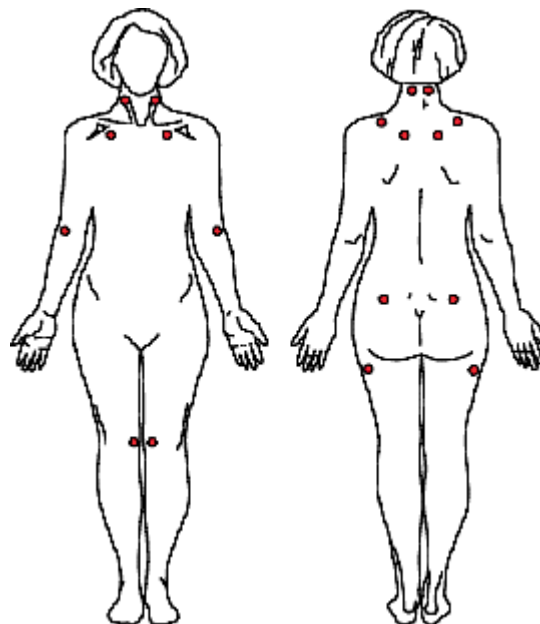
These areas with tender points may include:

Front and back of the neck

Mid to upper back and the shoulders

Upper chest, elbows

Upper buttocks, hips, knees



*Fibromyalgia "tender points" from the
National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.*

More recent data indicates that there may be an increased, or hyper-sensitivity to pain throughout the body. Body pains may move around (migratory), or may exist as chronic regional pain (stationary). Most experts are said to believe that Fibromyalgia results from abnormal central nervous system functioning. Responses to stress and psychobehavioral factors may also contribute to Fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia primarily occurs in women of childbearing age. Children, the elderly, and men can also be affected. Hereditary predisposition may be a factor, as well as life experiences prior. There may be periods that are flare-ups (severe worsening of symptoms) or remission (less symptom periods); however, the disorder is generally perceived as non-progressive.

Other non-defining symptoms associated with Fibromyalgia that may be experienced include: Disturbed sleep. People with FMS often sleep lightly and wake up during the night. They also often wake up feeling tired and unrefreshed. Insomnia may become a chronic exhausting problem. REM stage of sleeping is frequently not achieved.

Fatigue. People with FMS may often feel tired throughout the day. This kind of fatigue is on multi-levels: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Lying down for a rest does not alleviate it; pretty much nothing does.

Mood changes. Some people with FMS report that they feel "blue" or "down." Others report feeling anxious, or become tearful easily. Depression is frequently seen. Mood swings may occur. Emotionally labile.

Memory and cognitive difficulties. Problems with thinking. Some people with FMS say that they often feel confused, can't concentrate, and have memory lapses. These problems have been referred to as "fibro fog". The pain can be literally blinding to anything else but the pain, and thinking at all can be difficult.

Headaches. These headaches can be stress-related, chemical/hormonal imbalance, sinus, muscle and/or trigger point related, or a sort-of extended pain that is all over the body up through the head.

Numbness in the extremities. This may be caused from muscle tension, trigger points, puffiness/congestion of soft tissues putting pressure on nerves, CNS dysfunction, and sometimes the reason is unknown.

Night sweats. These can occur with regularity, or be isolated experiences.

TMJ. Temporomandibular Joint Syndrome is now known to be primarily a soft-tissue, or muscle related problem. Pain, stiffness, trigger points, and muscle spasm are contributing issues. When sleep is possible, grinding teeth may occur, which worsens TMJ.

Plantar Fasciitis. Plantar or sole of the foot and/or heel pain can make walking a very painful experience, like beating the bottom of your foot and then trying to walk on it. The posterior fascia line runs across the length of the bottom of the foot. It can become short and tight, develop trigger points, cause heel spurs to form, become twisted, and affect the body's structural alignment. It is possible for plantar fasciitis to play a role in back/hip pain as well as headaches.

Rib cage pain. This is a noncardiac-related chest pain. The intercostals attach on the lateral borders of the sternum. This area can have tightness and tension, and possibly trigger points present. This is usually soft-tissue related.

ENT complaints. Ear-nose-throat issues, multiple chemical sensitivities and a wide array of

allergic symptoms may be present. Chronic Sinusitis.

Heat or cold intolerance. Temperature sensitivities may have always been part of a person's makeup, or may abruptly or gradually change. Central nervous system malfunctioning or hypersensitivity may be a culprit for this, as well as hormonal/chemical imbalances. There may be a sensitivity to barometric changes. Low body temperature and/or low grade fever may be factors.

Cardiovascular symptoms. Evidence on an echocardiogram of mitral valve prolapse may be seen, palpitations, neurologic conditions causing hypotension (low blood pressure) and syncope (fainting). Heartburn is fairly common, and esophageal dysmotility (muscles of the esophagus not working properly). Data is inconclusive concerning hypertension. But pain itself is well known to raise a person's blood pressure.

Hearing, vision, and vestibular (balance) abnormalities. Dizziness may be present. These issues may be due to structural imbalance caused by muscles or bones, or CNS disturbance.

Chronic pelvic pain. Is often muscle, or neuromuscular in etiology. Muscle asymmetry, spasms, trigger points, scar tissue formation, pelvic tilt, or the pain may be related to a structural imbalance. Hormonal/chemical imbalance may be a contributing factor.

Painful or irregular menstrual periods. Hormonal/chemical imbalances. Neuromuscular issues.

Fluctuations in weight. May be related to irritable bowel syndrome, muscle issues in the back or abdomen, intermittent bloating, or be chemical/hormonal in nature.

Complaints of no energy. Subjective feeling of weakness and inability to maintain normal activity levels. Requiring more rest periods that may or may not help. Extreme exhaustion.

Restless legs. This may be due to vascular problems, can involve the myofascia, but is often associated with muscle cramps and trigger points in the calves.

Sensitive to medications. Increased or decreased sensitivity to medications. Intolerances to alcohol and various chemicals ingested. Increase in drug side-effects, such as nausea.

Increased thirst. Usually hormonal/chemical in nature, or a CNS response.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. Pain in arms, wrists, hands. Often neuromuscular in nature.

Insulin regulation. Blood sugar levels may run low (hypoglycemia), or insulin resistance (hyperglycemia). Generally related to insulin, a hormone.

Frequent infections and yeast overgrowth. Immune system dysfunctioning.

As the above list indicates, numerous body systems can be affected, making diagnosis very difficult. Experts are investigating a new blood test that may be able to detect Fibromyalgia in up to 50% of sufferers. While this may be available to some patients, as well as other lab and xray diagnostics, others still will have no definitive medical evidence that they're sick. To make a diagnosis, doctors must usually rely on signs and symptoms alone. And signs and symptoms may appear to be unrelated, or mimic other conditions. Complicating the matter, symptoms vary widely from person to person and often, as do their intensity. There is not a cut-and-dried blueprint for this condition that affects more than 6 million people in the U.S.

Treatments

Treatment of Fibromyalgia for many years has been trial-and-error. With no two people having exactly the same combination of symptoms, it has been difficult to come up with a universal approach. Medications and therapies are usually tried until the appropriate cocktail can be

figured out per person. Lifestyle changes are generally necessary, including nutrition, exercise, massage and bodywork, chiropractic, medications, rest, and sometimes useful are psychotherapies. New centers are beginning to emerge specifically for Fibromyalgia. Hope is on the horizon.

Pharmacologic management is often necessary, including narcotics, antidepressants, hypnotics, anti-anxiety, anti-inflammatory, anti-histamines, and muscle relaxants. Addressing pain and sleep disturbances lessens stress and fatigue. Two new drugs being prescribed are Cymbalta and Lyrica, with positive results in some individuals. Depending on which syndrome of symptoms a person may be experiencing, a variety of other medications and supplements could be used. Addressing the underlying etiologies that cause Fibromyalgia symptoms is crucial medically. Balancing of the hormones and evaluating hypothalamus and pituitary function is important. Treating infectious components and treat underlying viral, fungal, and parasitic infections should be done early on. Addressing unique etiologies such as neurotoxins and coagulation defects is advisable. Arnica Montana (homeopathic) is helpful with muscle soreness, bruising, and healing. Mitochondrial Enhancement is a therapy that improves the powerhouse of each cell, or the "mitochondria", and is used at a few of the newer Fibromyalgia centers. Providing an individualized maintenance program with minimally necessary medications and supplements to assure absence of symptoms is the best approach.

Exercise and stretching have proven beneficial. Light stretching is a good way to start, slowly adding exercise when stiffness starts decreasing. Yoga and Pilates are good choices that combine stretching and exercise in the same session. They help muscles to become long and lean and strong, which helps to decrease the formation of new trigger points. Adding weights may need to be done slowly and cautiously because muscles may injure more easily, increase soreness, or promote the development of trigger points. Less can be more with exercise, at least initially until body stabilization is achieved and muscles can gradually become somewhat accustomed to the stress and stimulation. It is much easier to start slowly and build up, than to ricochet into pain and have to deal with that problem. Slow and consistent is a much more preferable approach. Tai chi may also be helpful.

Taking nutritional supplements is usually beneficial. Depression or having the gastrointestinal tract affected tends to decrease appetites, or increase eating 'comfort foods'. At least a balanced multivitamin/mineral supplement is a good idea to balance inadequate dietary intake. In a 2001 review of case studies, symptoms were alleviated by minimizing consumption of monosodium glutamate. Reviews of the research indicate that the physiological effect of monosodium glutamate is overstated. There are few other studies linking diet with any impact on Fibromyalgia. Foods with fewer additives in general, are preferable. Proper nutrition is what keeps the body functioning; inadequate nutrition causes a whole array of problems. The saying, 'you are what you eat' is quite valid.

Massage and bodywork are important. Massage calms the nervous system, slows and deepens breathing, helps decrease anxiety, and relaxes muscle tension. When stress levels can be decreased, energy is increased for vital functions of the body such as digestion - needed for maximum healing and nutrition throughout your body - and repair of damaged tissues. Muscles

respond well to Neuromuscular Therapy, or NMT. Tissue salts, cellular debris, and general body toxins build up in soft tissues. Trigger points are frequently present. Often muscles become short and tight. Neuromuscular therapy works more on the muscles' insertion points into bones where tightness and trigger points are more likely to occur, and helps alleviate postural distortions that cause pain from the structure being off-balance. This form of therapy promotes the body to heal itself and improve structural alignment.

Lymphatic drainage is helpful by boosting the immune system, detoxifying the body, and alleviating blockages in the lymphatic system that could be causing fluid retention and bloating. Plus it is gentle, soothing, and very relaxing.

Myofascial release techniques are often a good choice in the beginning sessions because the fascia can become twisted, bunched up, or be pulling tightly. This can cause the body structure to be off balance (postural distortions). Kind of like pantyhose that are too tight or twisted, and putting pressure on muscles and organs. Myofascia is a treatable pain.

Craniosacral therapy is a gentle, non-aggressive massage approach. Craniosacral therapy involves the manipulation of the skull bones (the cranium) and the sacrum to relieve pain and a variety of other ailments, and helps the flow of cerebrospinal fluid. The body has a rhythm that can be palpated by a skilled practitioner, and balanced. It is a gentle, relaxing therapy.

Swedish massage may not be a good idea, at least in the initial stages of treatment, because the movements can irritate trigger points, or simply be too aggressive for a sore body, and actually make soft tissue pain much worse.

Every person with Fibromyalgia is unique, and there is not specific protocol for soft tissue treatment. Some people tolerate more aggressive forms of massage. But in my experience, a slower, more cautious approach has been more helpful, because first, do no harm. Overly enthusiastic massage can flip a person quickly into an increased pain stage. Less is better initially, until tissues and levels of pain can be assessed and worked with.

Chiropractic care is usually very helpful. With so many pains and problems in the soft tissues, the skeletal system can be pulled out of place, intensifying pain symptoms. Chiropractic and massage together work well stabilizing the physical structure. Structural imbalance is a frequent issue, and proper body alignment is crucial treating Fibromyalgia. After initial treatments, a maintenance schedule of massage and adjustments can help maintain structural balance and decrease periods of exacerbation. Life can be more livable. In addition, knowing there is something you can do to alleviate symptoms, even temporarily, can reduce stress and free up physical and emotional resources that your body needs to heal. Treating the whole body instead of just individual symptoms is definitely the best approach.

If pain is present, especially if any of the wide array of symptoms listed are present too, please seek help. If your medical doctor is not helpful, and medication intervention is not desired, find a massage therapist with advanced training. Massage/neuromuscular therapy may be extremely beneficial with decreasing pain and increasing mobility and functioning. When pain is present, the tendency to not move is huge. Chiropractic and soft tissue treatment alone can greatly increase mobility, flexibility, and improve quality of life. And evaluation of diet/nutrition is advisable. There is help available. Don't give up hope just yet!

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