

Fibromyalgia: What It Is and How To Manage It

What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes pain in the muscles, joints, ligaments and tendons. The pain occurs in certain parts of the body, and these painful areas are called tender points. Common tender points are the front of the knees and elbows, the hip joints and around the neck.

Fibromyalgia affects 2% to 6% of the population, including children. This disorder might be hereditary, so you may have family members with similar symptoms.

What are the symptoms of fibromyalgia?

Increased sensitivity to pain is the main symptom of fibromyalgia. Many other symptoms also occur in patients with this disorder. Symptoms may come and go.

You may have some degree of constant pain, but the severity of pain may vary in response to activity, stress, weather changes and other factors. You may have a deep ache or a burning pain. You may have muscle tightening or spasms. Many patients have migratory pain (pain that moves around the body).

Most people with fibromyalgia feel tired or out of energy. This fatigue may be mild or very severe. You may also have trouble sleeping, and this may add to the fatigue.

You may have feelings of numbness or tingling in parts of your body, or a sensation of poor blood flow in some areas. Many patients are very sensitive to odors, bright lights, loud noises and even medicines. Headaches and jaw pain are also common.

In addition, you may have dry eyes or difficulty focusing on nearby objects. Problems with dizziness and balance may also occur. Some patients have chest pain, heart palpitations or shortness of breath.

Digestive symptoms are also common in fibromyalgia and include difficulty swallowing, heartburn, gas, cramping abdominal pain, and alternating diarrhea and constipation.

Some patients have urinary complaints, including frequent urination, a strong urge to urinate and pain in the bladder area. Women with fibromyalgia often have pelvic symptoms, including pelvic pain, painful menstrual periods and painful sexual intercourse.

Why do I feel depressed?

Depression or anxiety may occur as a result of the chronic pain and fatigue, or the frustration you feel with the condition. It is also possible that the same chemical imbalances in the brain that cause fibromyalgia might also cause depression and anxiety.

Does fibromyalgia cause permanent damage?

No. Although fibromyalgia causes symptoms that can be very uncomfortable, your muscles and organs are not being damaged. This condition is not life-threatening, but it is chronic, or ongoing. Although there is no cure, you can do many things to help you feel better.

Is there any medicine I can take to help my symptoms?

Several medicines can help relieve symptoms of fibromyalgia. Many of these medicines (such as amitriptyline [brand name: Elavil] or cyclobenzaprine [brand name: Flexeril]) are taken before bedtime and improve your sleep. They also help the pain and other symptoms.

You will probably begin to notice the benefits of these medicines in about 6 to 8 weeks. When you begin taking these medicines, it is common to feel very groggy the following morning. Other possible side effects include dry eyes and mouth, nightmares, constipation and increased appetite. These side effects are worse when you first begin taking the medicine and improve with time.

What else can I do to relieve my symptoms?

One of the best things you can do is low-impact aerobic exercise. Examples of this type of exercise include swimming or water exercise, stationary bicycling and exercising on ski-type machines. You may need to begin at a very low level of exercise (5 minutes every other day is helpful at first). Continue to increase the length and frequency of exercise until you are exercising at least 20 to 30 minutes at least 4 times a week. Once you reach this point, you can consider switching to high-impact exercises, like walking, jogging and tennis.

Because the symptoms of fibromyalgia are made worse by stress and poor sleep, it is important to cut stress out of your life whenever possible and to get as much sleep as you need. Since alcohol and caffeine cause poor sleep, avoid these substances near bedtime.

Other simple lifestyle changes may be helpful. For example, try keeping your activity level the same each day. Many people with fibromyalgia try to do as much as possible on "good" days, which leads them to have several "bad" days. If you keep your activity level even, you may not have as many "bad" days.

In many cities, there are fibromyalgia patient groups that can provide both information and support. The Arthritis Foundation also has some information you may be interested in reading. In addition, a newsletter on this disorder is available from the Fibromyalgia Network Newsletter, P.O. Box 31750, Tucson, AZ 85751-1750, or call (520) 290-5508.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.