

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS or fibromyalgia) is a term used to describe a cluster of symptoms that may include widespread pain and tenderness in 'trigger points' on the body that are unusually sore to touch. Symptoms of fibromyalgia can vary widely from mild to severe.

Fibromyalgia affects two to four per cent of the population, mainly women, although men and adolescents can also develop the condition. It tends to develop during early and middle adulthood or in a woman's childbearing years.

Symptoms of fibromyalgia

The symptoms of fibromyalgia can vary widely from mild to severe. The most common symptoms include any of the following:

- Extreme fatigue (tiredness)
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Increased sensitivity to sensory stimuli such as heat, cold and smell
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Problems with sleep.

It is important to remember that each person with fibromyalgia will have their own unique set of symptoms. Not everyone experiences the same symptoms.

The symptoms of fibromyalgia can go up and down. Many people find the symptoms are worst first thing in the morning and last thing at night. The symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe. There may be extended periods of time – perhaps even years – when symptoms disappear. Other people have pain every day or there may be variations between these two extremes.

Some people with fibromyalgia may also have other symptoms such as irritable bowel syndrome, irritable or overactive bladder, headaches and swelling and numbness or tingling in the arms and legs. Living with ongoing pain and fatigue can also often lead to secondary problems such as anxiety and depression.

Cause of fibromyalgia

The cause or causes of fibromyalgia are not known. It may be more common in people with:

- Lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, or ankylosing spondylitis.
- An illness such as a virus (or following an illness or infection)
- Pain from an injury or trauma
- Emotional stress and depression.

There is no cure but treatment can help some symptoms.

Aggravating factors for fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia may be aggravated by a number of factors, including:

- Weather changes
- Hard physical labour
- Mental stress
- Infections

- Allergies
- Overexertion
- Other musculoskeletal disorders, such as rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis.

Diagnosis of fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia can be very difficult to diagnose as it does not cause any inflammation or damage. There are no blood tests, x-rays or scans that can test for fibromyalgia, but these tests may be used to help exclude other conditions.

There are signs that may suggest a diagnosis of fibromyalgia. These are:

- A history of widespread pain for three months or longer
- Abnormal tenderness at particular points around the neck, shoulder, chest, hip, knee and elbow
- Disturbed sleep patterns.

Treatment for fibromyalgia

There is no cure for fibromyalgia. Effective management starts with a correct diagnosis. A management program should then be designed to meet each person's needs.

Generally, management will include a combination of the following:

- **Education** – people with fibromyalgia need to understand the condition in order to decide what management approach will help their own circumstances. Self-management courses can teach new skills to help people with fibromyalgia manage their condition.
- **Medication** – combined with other strategies, medication may be used to manage pain, reduce stress or promote sleep.
- **Exercise** – a gentle exercise program, such as tai chi or water-based exercise, can help to manage symptoms such as pain, fatigue and sleep disturbance.
- **Stress management and relaxation** – stress may aggravate symptoms. Skills that can help manage stress include planning, relaxation, assertiveness and emotional management.
- **Balancing rest and activity** – plan your activities to make the most of your energy by alternating periods of activity with rest. Break large jobs down into small achievable tasks so that you do not overdo things.
- **Massage** – this can aid muscle relaxation and stress management.
- **Nutrition** – eating a balanced diet can help provide you with better energy levels, help to maintain your weight, and give you a greater sense of wellbeing.
- **Support from others** – contact Arthritis Victoria for information about support group locations and contact details.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rheumatologist
- Arthritis Victoria Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041

Things to remember

- Fibromyalgia is a term used to describe a cluster of symptoms that may include widespread pain and tenderness in 'trigger points' on the body that are abnormally sore to touch.
- Each person with fibromyalgia will have their own set of symptoms. Not everyone experiences the same symptoms.
- There is no cure, but symptoms can be managed.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Arthritis Victoria incorporating Osteoporosis Victoria

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