
Fibromyalgia

Summary

- Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes widespread pain and tenderness in the body.
 - Each person with fibromyalgia will have their own set of symptoms.
 - There is no cure for fibromyalgia, but symptoms can be managed.
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Fibromyalgia is a condition in which people experience symptoms that include widespread pain and tenderness in the body, often accompanied by fatigue and problems with memory and concentration.

Fibromyalgia affects two to five per cent of the population, mainly women, although men and adolescents can also develop the condition. It tends to develop during middle adulthood.

Symptoms of fibromyalgia

The symptoms of fibromyalgia can vary from mild to severe. The most common symptoms are:

- increased sensitivity to pain due to a decreased pain threshold
- increased responsiveness to sensory stimuli such as heat, cold, light, smell
- extreme fatigue (tiredness)
- problems with memory and concentration (fibro fog)
- problems with sleep.

It's important to remember that each person with fibromyalgia will have their own unique set of symptoms.

The symptoms of fibromyalgia are variable. They can be mild, moderate or severe. Symptoms may disappear for extended periods of time, perhaps even years. Other people have pain every day, or experience variations between these two extremes.

Some people with fibromyalgia 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 often leads to secondary problems such as anxiety and depression.

Causes of fibromyalgia

No one knows what causes fibromyalgia. However it appears that genes may play a role, as well as triggers such as an illness, injury or a period of physical or emotional stress and pain. However fibromyalgia may also appear without any obvious cause.

Fibromyalgia is more common in people with:

- lupus or rheumatoid arthritis
 - an illness such as a virus (or a recent illness or infection)
 - pain from an injury or trauma
 - emotional stress and depression
 - family history of fibromyalgia
 - previous pain syndromes
 - mood disorders
 - substance abuse.
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There is no cure for fibromyalgia, but treatment can help you manage your symptoms.

Triggers for fibromyalgia flares

At times the symptoms you experience as a result of your fibromyalgia (such as pain or fatigue) will become more intense. This is called a flare. Flares can be triggered or made worse by several factors including:

- weather changes
- overexertion
- mental stress
- illness or injury
- travelling
- hormonal changes
- changes in treatment.

Triggers vary from person to person. Understanding the things that cause your fibromyalgia to flare means that you can be prepared and take steps to lessen the effect they will have on you and your life.

Diagnosing fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia can be difficult to diagnose as the symptoms are common to many other conditions. It may take some time to establish a diagnosis of fibromyalgia, which can be very frustrating.

Your doctor will take your medical history and description of your symptoms, and do a physical examination. This may include testing how you respond to touch at specific sites across your body.

You may also have tests, including blood tests, x-rays or scans. While these tests cannot diagnose fibromyalgia, your doctor may use them to rule out other conditions.

Signs that suggest a diagnosis of fibromyalgia are:

- widespread pain for three months or longer
- abnormal tenderness at particular points around the neck, shoulder, chest, hip, knee and elbow
- disturbed sleep patterns.

Treating fibromyalgia

While there is no cure for fibromyalgia, your symptoms can be effectively managed. This starts with a correct diagnosis. A management program will then be designed to meet your specific needs.

Generally management of fibromyalgia will involve a combination of:

- education – you need to understand your condition in order to manage it well. The more you know about your condition (for example, what triggers flares, how to manage pain and fatigue) the more control you'll have. Understanding your fibromyalgia means you'll be able to make informed decisions about your healthcare and play an active role in its management
- exercise – regular **physical activity** has lots of general health benefits. It can also help you manage the symptoms of your condition. When you start exercising regularly you should notice an improvement in the quality of your sleep, an increase in energy levels, a reduction in fatigue, and improvements in your overall strength and fitness
- learn ways to manage your **pain** – there are many things you can do to manage pain, and different strategies will work for different situations. For example, heat packs can help ease muscle pain, cold packs can help with inflammation, gentle exercise can help relieve muscle tension. Try different techniques until you find what works best for you
- **stress** management and relaxation – stress may aggravate your symptoms. Things you can do to manage stress include planning your day and setting priorities, using relaxation techniques such as going for a walk or listening to music and avoiding people and situations that cause you stress
- 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 don't overdo things
- staying at work – it's good for your health and wellbeing. Talk to your doctor or allied healthcare professional about ways to help you to get back to or to stay at work
 - sleep – it's important to get a good night's **sleep** when you have fibromyalgia. Poor sleep, both quantity and quality, can aggravate your symptoms
 - **massage** – can help with 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 **Musculoskeletal Australia** for information about peer support group locations and contact details.

Medication

Combined with other strategies, medication may be used to manage pain, reduce stress or promote sleep. There are different types of medication that your doctor may recommend:

- pain-relievers (analgesics) – medications such as paracetamol can provide temporary pain relief
- creams and ointments – can be rubbed into the skin over a painful area to provide temporary pain relief
- anti-depressant medications – may be used in small doses to reduce pain and help you sleep.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rheumatologist
- **Musculoskeletal Australia**. National Help Line Tel. **(03) 8531 8000** or **1800 263 265**

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