

## **Fibromyalgia**

Fibromyalgia syndrome is a chronic illness that causes pain throughout the body. It is diagnosed by having your doctor look for pain at certain “tender points” on your body. These points are found in the neck, back, shoulders, and hips, and other areas. If you are tender at a certain number of these points, your doctor may diagnose fibromyalgia.

People with fibromyalgia may have fatigue, problems with sleep, morning stiffness, stomach upset, and other problems. Many patients also suffer from depression or anxiety. While fibromyalgia may affect three to six million Americans, it is seven times more common in women than in men. The reason for this is unknown. Children may have fibromyalgia as well.

Doctors do not yet know what causes fibromyalgia, but they have identified several possible causes. The brain and spinal cord have circuits that help reduce the amount of pain we feel. These circuits may be damaged in fibromyalgia. Some doctors think that injury or trauma to the brain or spinal cord may cause it. Others think abnormal hormone levels in the body are responsible. Low blood pressure, very mobile (“stretchy”) joints and ligaments, and infections have all been examined as possible causes. Research into the cause is ongoing.

Other diseases can look like fibromyalgia, and your doctor will make sure you do not have those other diseases before diagnosing fibromyalgia. When checking your health history, your doctor will be looking for chronic pain that has lasted for more than three months and involves at least three-fourths of the body. You must be tender in at least 11 of 18 tender point sites.

You, your doctor and your physical therapist all play an active role in the treatment of your fibromyalgia. The most helpful treatment is rehabilitation, mainly light aerobic exercise. Studies have shown that aerobic exercise, such as swimming or walking, reduces pain and tenderness and improves fitness in fibromyalgia patients. Exercise can also improve sleep patterns. Exercise is typically painful at first. You may need to start with as little as five minutes of exercise, working towards a goal of twenty or thirty minutes four or more times a week. In the beginning, your exercise program should be supervised by a physical therapist, often as part of a larger rehabilitation team including other therapists and doctors specializing in rehab.

Medicines can be given to treat depression, improve sleep and relax muscles. Some pain medicines may be useful, but they work best when used in combination with non-drug treatments. Heat, cold, massage, and acupuncture may give short-term relief, though they do not cure fibromyalgia. Most people find the greatest help by combining exercise, medication, and relaxation.

If you have problems with anxiety or depression, your doctor may recommend some visits to a psychologist or counselor. These professionals can help you to learn new ways to cope with your pain, like relaxation techniques and biofeedback. They may provide advice and support to help you deal with difficult parts of your life.

The goal of treatment is to help you to live with your fibromyalgia. Your treatment team will work with you to reach a higher level of function at work, at home, and throughout your daily life. They will help you to have less pain whenever possible. There is no known cure for fibromyalgia, so we cannot expect your symptoms to completely disappear. By working with your doctor and therapists, you should be able to function better and enjoy your life.

You can find out more about fibromyalgia from:

Arthritis Foundation  
1330 West Peachtree Street  
Atlanta, GA 30309  
800-283-7800

<http://www.arthritis.org>

Or, call your local chapter, listed in the phone book

Fibromyalgia Alliance of America  
PO Box 21990  
Columbus, OH 43221-0990  
614-457-4222

Fibromyalgia Network  
PO Box 31750  
Tucson, AZ 85751-1750  
800-853-2929

National Fibromyalgia Partnership  
140 Zinn Way  
Linden, Virginia USA 22642-5609

Toll Free Phone: 866-725-4404  
Fax: 540-622-2998

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