Fibromyalgia Syndrome

What is Fibromyalgia?

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?
Autoimmune Resource & Research Centre
Telephone: 02 49214095
email: ARRC@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au
web: www.autoimmune.org.au

Things that may be helpful

- Keeping warm and always warming muscle with gentle stretching before starting the day.
- Drink plenty of water to reduce dryness symptoms.
- A good supportive neck pillow for resting.
- Body sleep supports such as body pillows can help with back pain.
- Gentle massage with moisturising lotions to help itchy skin and tight muscles.

- Heat packs and water bottles for temporary relief of painful joints.
- Stress management, including counselling, biofeedback and relaxation techniques are often beneficial.

- Learn to timetable rest times after active times.

- Tailored exercise programs which could include Aqua aerobics, Tai Chi, Pilates, Qi Gong or gentle Yoga can help ease muscle tension and pain.

- Your diet should include a variety of healthy foods.
- Live well and enjoy life.

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What is Fibromyalgia Syndrome?

The fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS) is a chronic pain condition, usually accompanied by ongoing periods of exhaustion. The word comes from fibre meaning fibrous tissue (ligaments & tendons), myo meaning muscle, and algia is used to describe pain.

Approximately 2-10% of the population will have experience with fibromyalgia over their lifetime. The syndrome ranges from mild to severe and can last for varying periods of time from quite short to extended long periods. A mild case is merely a nuisance. Severe cases can affect quality of life preventing people living with fibromyalgia to alter the way they live their lives, work and socialise.

Fibromyalgia can affect all age groups, including children however is more common in 35-50 year olds. It is also more common in women than men 10:1 although more men are now being diagnosed with the condition. Children and young people who have FMS are often mistakenly diagnosed as having growing pains or behavioural problems.

Most people with fibromyalgia have additional health problems that affect various functions in mind and body, and many also have diseases of the immune system such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, scleroderma and Sjögrens.

FMS is a complex condition that can be triggered by a number of factors such as a fall or auto accident, childbirth or hysterectomy or, often, a viral illness, suggesting a genetic predisposition. With research going on into its many aspects, it is likely that more effective treatment will soon be found.

What are the signs and symptoms?

People with fibromyalgia hurt all over feeling widespread pain in many different parts of the body including arms, legs, back, chest, hands, feet and even cheekbones and jaw. They also can experience extreme tiredness or fatigue. Fibromyalgia itself causes no detectable damage to tissues or organs in the body.

No one knows what causes fibromyalgia, although studies have found:
- a high level of substance P, a pain transmitter, in the spinal fluid of people who have the condition, as well as
- low levels of serotonin, a chemical that moderates pain.

The pain tends to get worse in the parts of the body that are used the most, suggesting that muscles may lack sufficient oxygen or have a lowered ability to use oxygen as fuel.

Many people with fibromyalgia have sleep disorders which cause constant interruptions of the deep, slow-wave sleep needed for rest and restoration of tissue. This is the likely cause of the profound fatigue that people experience.

How is it diagnosed?

Many of the symptoms of fibromyalgia can be found in other conditions as well. Therefore a diagnosis of fibromyalgia starts with taking a patient’s medical history and prescribing lab tests that will rule out such conditions as the cause of the symptoms. Fibromyalgia is then diagnosed by 2 criteria:

1. Widespread pain for at least 3 months, and
2. 11 or more of the 18 defined tender points “tender points” found in precise locations on the body. This particular pattern of tender points occurs only in FMS.

How is it treated?

Treatment of fibromyalgia is aimed at alleviating its symptoms.

- Self-management techniques that can help promote emotional wellbeing including meditation and visualisation techniques have been shown to reduce some of the effects of FMS.

- The use of therapy aids such as heat packs, and support pillows while sleeping have also been reported to be beneficial.

- Exercise, after warming and gentle stretching muscle can be of help to alleviate some joint and muscle pain, as well as promoting better sleep patterns resulting in reduced fatigue. Exercise should be an individualised program. Exercise such as Tai Chi, Qii Gong and some gentle yoga or stretching suit many FMS patients.

- Medications can be also prescribed in consultation with your doctor. Medications are usually prescribed to:
  - improve sleep
  - reduce pain, or
  - increase Serotonin levels.