

FIBROMYALGIA

12 May 2022



Fibromyalgia (pronounced fy-bro-my-al-ja) is a complex long-term condition characterised by widespread chronic pain and tenderness. The term refers to pain in muscles and fibrous tissues (tendons and ligaments).

SYMPTOMS

- Widespread pain lasting more than 3 months, experienced on both sides of the body, both above and below the waist
- Pain in specific tender points
- Ongoing fatigue that does not get better with sleep or rest
- Cognitive and memory problems
- Trouble sleeping, sometimes associated with restless leg syndrome
- Morning stiffness
- Muscle fatigue, causing twitching or cramps
- Headaches
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or irritable bladder leading to frequency or urgency
- Painful periods
- Numbness or tingling of hands or feet
- Temperature sensitivity such as 'feeling the cold'
- Sensitivity to loud noises or bright lights

CAUSES

While the cause of fibromyalgia is unknown, emerging evidence suggests an association with abnormalities in the nervous system - both central (brain and spinal cord) and peripheral (nerves). These abnormalities impair the nervous system's ability to inhibit pain messages, so represent a malfunction in the way pain, touch and pressure signals are processed.

RISK FACTORS

These factors are associated with a higher risk of Fibromyalgia:

- **Gender:** 90% of cases are women or those assigned female at birth (AFAB)
- **Stressful or traumatic events:** such as a car accident, infection, illness, or repetitive injury as well as emotional stress or trauma
- Family history

DIAGNOSIS

A diagnosis begins by eliminating other possible causes of ongoing pain symptoms including recent injury, followed by the presence at least 11 of 18 assessed tender points (on both sides of the body, above and below the waist and down the length of the spine).

TREATMENTS

Fibromyalgia can be difficult to treat, and self-care is important. The goals of treatment are to improve sleep and increase the ability to do things while reducing pain as much as possible.

Medications are often not very effective in treating pain relating to Fibromyalgia; paracetamol, anti-inflammatories, and opioids rarely give much relief from the pain.

Exercise

While those with fibromyalgia are likely to experience some pain when they first start exercising, research has shown that combining stretching with moderate-intensity aerobic exercise can increase sleep quality, reduce pain intensity, improve mood, increase daily activity levels and decrease the overall impact of fibromyalgia on quality of life. A physical therapist can help with a tailored exercise plan.

Movement Therapies

Yoga and Tai Chi can improve mobility and decrease muscle tightness.

Complementary Therapies

Therapies such as acupuncture, massage, infra-red heat, hot packs and TENS machines may help ease muscle tension.

Stress and sleep management

Stress can aggravate most symptoms. Relaxation methods and mindfulness can help reduce stress, tension and anxiety by redirecting thoughts. Prioritising sleep is important

Nutritional changes

Eating healthily can help with symptoms, including minimising processed foods, sugar and caffeine. If blood tests indicate deficiencies, carefully-chosen supplements may be helpful.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT is a form of counselling that can help adjust to living with symptoms of Fibromyalgia.

For further information and support:

- Insight Endometriosis: Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Insight Endometriosis: Pacing for Pain Management and Pacing Template
- Insight Endometriosis: Mental Wellbeing and Self-Care
- NHS Guide to Sleep: <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Sleeping%20Problems.pdf>
- Fibromyalgia NZ – www.fibromyalgia.org.nz
- Complex Chronic Illness Support: <https://ccisupport.org.nz/>

References:

Health Navigator - <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/f/fibromyalgia/>

Exercise: <https://www.goodfellowunit.org/gems/stretching-addition-moderate-exercise-helpful-women-fibromyalgia>