

Fibromyalgia

What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a disorder that causes aches and pain all over the body. It is a chronic (ongoing) condition of pain, stiffness, and usually fatigue.

Fibromyalgia affects several million people in the US. It is usually diagnosed in middle age although symptoms may start at an earlier age. It usually occurs in women, but men and children can have it as well.

How does it occur?

What fibromyalgia is exactly, or what causes it, is not known. Fibromyalgia has been linked to:

- emotional or physical stress
- anxiety
- depression
- traumatic events such as a car accident
- infections or other illness
- lack of restful sleep.

Women who have a family member with fibromyalgia are more likely to have it themselves. It is not known if this is due to hereditary or environmental factors or both.

What are the symptoms?

Pain is the main symptom. The aches, pains, and stiffness in muscles, joints, and other parts of the body vary from day to day or week to week. The pain also tends to move from one part of the body to another. It is most common in the neck, chest, arms, legs, hips, and back.

Other common symptoms are:

- tiredness
- headaches
- problems with the digestive system, especially trouble swallowing, recurrent abdominal pain, or diarrhea.

You may:

- have trouble sleeping
- have problems with thinking and remembering things

feel depressed or nervous
feel dizzy or light headed
have an upset stomach.

People with fibromyalgia also are tender throughout the body. The tenderness is most noticed at certain places called tender points. Tender points are specific places on the neck, shoulders, back, hips, arms, and legs. These points hurt when pressure is put on them.

The symptoms may get worse when you overexert yourself or when the weather is damp and cold. Younger adults with fibromyalgia are more likely to have chronic headaches, anxiety, and symptoms worsened by weather, mental stress, or poor sleep.

How is it diagnosed?

There is no single test for fibromyalgia. Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and your patterns of symptoms. He or she will examine you, looking for places that are tender.

How is it treated?

There is no approved medicine that can cure fibromyalgia. The most successful treatment for fibromyalgia is a healthy diet, regular exercise, and rest.

The diet should include a large variety of fruits and vegetables. These foods provide the body with trace elements and minerals that help the muscles. Also, the fiber in fruits and vegetables helps the digestive system.

Exercise affects the levels of many biochemicals in the body, particularly in the nervous system. This may be why symptoms of fibromyalgia often improve when people exercise regularly. Because much of the pain of fibromyalgia is in the muscles and joints, you should begin an exercise program gradually, as recommended by your healthcare provider. Include good warm-ups and cool-downs. Do types of exercise that do not hurt your joints.

Rest is as important as diet and exercise in the treatment of fibromyalgia. Make sure you get enough restful sleep. In the evening avoid stimulating foods and drinks (such as coffee) and certain medicines (for example, decongestants).

If diet, exercise, and adequate rest do not relieve your symptoms, your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine to help relieve some of the symptoms. The drugs might include muscle relaxants and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Antidepressants may help you sleep and can also help relieve pain.

Your provider can also help to find other ways to reduce your pain and fatigue. For example, you may benefit from heat or massage therapy or a home exercise program

recommended by a physical therapist.

How long will the effects last?

Fibromyalgia is a chronic problem. The symptoms sometimes improve and at other times worsen, but they will probably continue for months to years. Although the illness can produce much discomfort, it does not damage your joints, muscles, or other tissues.

How can I take care of myself?

- Get regular exercise, according to your healthcare provider's recommendations.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes a lot of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- Make sure you get enough sleep every night.
- Do not smoke.
- Avoid doing too much at one time. Break up daily activities with periods of rest.
- Treat painful areas with a heating pad on a low setting or an ice pack wrapped in a towel.
- Try to practice new ways to react to pain and manage stress. For example, try relaxation exercises or meditation. A therapist may be able to help with this.
- If your provider recommended or prescribed medicine, take it exactly as directed.
- For more information, contact: National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
(NIAMS)
Phone: 877-22-NIAMS (877-226-4267)
Web site: <http://www.niams.nih.gov> ▶▶.

How can I help prevent fibromyalgia?

There is no known way to prevent fibromyalgia. However, as with many medical problems, staying as healthy as possible with regular exercise, a good diet, and enough rest may be the best prevention.

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