

## Diagnosis and Treatment of Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a chronic, widespread, debilitating disease that often manifests as diffuse pain, constant muscle aches and overwhelming fatigue. Although it affects about 2-6% of the general population (about five million people), fibromyalgia is not a contagious disease. Women are about 9 times more likely to be diagnosed than men, and it is most prevalent in people between 20-50 years of age.

Fibromyalgia usually displays a variety of symptoms including generalized aches and pains, increased sensitivity of the skin, chronic fatigue, weakness or dizziness, muscle stiffness or joint pain and migraine headaches. Symptoms of fibromyalgia vary greatly between individuals but almost all suffer from an associated sleep disorder. Depression, anxiety, irritable bowel syndrome, numbness and tingling of the extremities and heightened sensitivity to stimuli may also be present.

Currently, there is no known specific cause of fibromyalgia. Popular opinion suggests a disorder in pain perception and processing in the pathways to the brain. Research has shown that fibromyalgia patients have elevated levels of substance P (involved with enhanced pain perception) and a lower than normal production of natural stress hormones. Another theory revolves around a sleep disturbance as the cause, because many fibromyalgia patients cannot attain deep sleep. Still other theories have implicated reduced immune system function, environmental toxins, abnormal hormonal fluctuations, viral causes, genetic links and dysfunctional neurotransmitters. Although exciting new research is constantly being done, the cause of fibromyalgia remains elusive and has the medical world stumped.

Diagnosis of fibromyalgia is based on a specific set of criteria, including a physical examination or observation, and the symptoms described by the patient. Ruling out other possible diseases is key. Currently, there are no conclusive laboratory tests to identify fibromyalgia but for diagnostic purposes, there has to be a history of diffuse pain lasting longer than three months. Another diagnostic requirement is the presence of at least 11 "tender points" out of a possible 18 and these are typically located at elbow and knee joints, the neck, shoulders, lower back and hips...

Individual cases of fibromyalgia have a wide variability, but many patients also suffer from other disorders as well. These comorbid syndromes commonly include chronic clinical depression, Lyme disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, premenstrual syndrome, restless legs syndrome, spinal disorders, or hypothyroidism. There are also many factors that can aggravate fibromyalgia. Severe weather changes, nutritional deficiencies, over-exertion, increases in stress levels, allergies and cold weather have all been shown to contribute to flare-ups.

Treatment of fibromyalgia has historically been inadequate at best. There is no cure for the disease and therapies are usually aimed at alleviating the symptoms and improving quality of sleep. Medications commonly prescribed for fibromyalgia include conventional analgesics, low-dose antidepressants, muscle relaxants and sleep-inducing agents. Alternative therapies that have shown some promise include acupuncture, chiropractic care, physical therapy, meditation or relaxation techniques and a gentle aerobic exercise program. Other important considerations to prevent fibromyalgia from flaring up include a regular sleep routine, emotional and physical stress reduction, good social support networks and strategies to conserve energy and minimize triggering factors.

Fibromyalgia can be a very difficult disease to live with because of its chronic, disabling nature and the presence of widespread skepticism. There is often no objective evidence of physical illness and the disease is very poorly understood. Sufferers of fibromyalgia face accusations of laziness or feigning illness. Social activity and recreation is often avoided and the patient's career is usually affected as well. Although fibromyalgia can affect every aspect of its victims' lives, it does not have to be as devastating as it once was. With advanced scientific research and promising new treatments waiting in the wings, anything's possible.

Disclaimer: The information presented here should not be interpreted as or substituted for medical advice. Please talk to a qualified professional for more information about fibromyalgia.

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### About the Author

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