

Fibromyalgia

If you or your loved ones have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia, you may be wondering what the disorder means for you. The condition still remains a mystery, although an estimated 3 to 6 percent of Americans, predominantly women, have fibromyalgia syndrome. Even diagnosing the condition can be complex: according to the National Fibromyalgia Association, it can take a patient up to 4 years to be accurately diagnosed.

Fibromyalgia is typically diagnosed in patients with:

Widespread pain in all 4 quadrants of the body for a minimum of 3 months; and
Tenderness or pain in at least 11 tender points when pressure is applied. These tender points cluster around the neck, shoulder, chest, hip, knee, and elbow regions.

Some fibromyalgia experts say, however, that many people may still have fibromyalgia with fewer than 11 tender points if they have widespread pain and several other common symptoms, including:

- Fatigue
- Sleep disorders
- Chronic headaches
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Cognitive or memory impairment
- Malaise and muscle pain after exertion
- Jaw pain
- Morning stiffness
- Menstrual cramping
- Irritable bowels
- Numbness and tingling sensations
- Skin and chemical sensitivities

Correct Diagnosis Is Key

Correct diagnosis of fibromyalgia is very elusive, so if you are diagnosed with the disorder—or suspect that you have it—seek the opinion of more than 1 health care provider. Other conditions may create fibromyalgia—like pain, fatigue, and other symptoms. Ruling other conditions out first is very important.

In addition to clinical evaluation that will assess possible causes of your pain, your doctor may need to order blood work to determine if you have:

- Anemia
- Hypothyroidism
- Lyme disease
- Other rheumatic diseases
- Hormonal imbalances
- Allergies and nutritional deficiencies
- Disorders that cause pain, fatigue, and other fibromyalgia-like symptoms.

If the tests show that you have 1 of these conditions, treatment will focus on addressing that problem first. If your pain is caused by a muscle or joint condition, chiropractic care may help relieve it more effectively than other therapies.

Treatment Alternatives

If no underlying cause for your symptoms can be identified, you may have classic fibromyalgia. The traditional allopathic approach includes a prescription of prednisone, anti-inflammatory agents, antidepressants, sleep medications, and muscle relaxants. These temporarily relieve the symptoms, but they do produce side effects. If you prefer a natural approach, the following suggestions may be helpful:

Studies have shown that a combination of 300 to 600 mg of magnesium per day, along with malic acid, may significantly reduce the number of tender points and the pain felt at those that remain. B vitamins may also be helpful.

Eating more omega-3 fatty acids and fewer saturated fats has shown promise in fibromyalgia patients. Limit red meat and saturated fats and increase the amounts of omega-3 fatty acids by including fish, flax, and walnut oils in your diet. Fatty acid deficiencies can interfere with the nervous system and brain function, resulting in depression and poor memory and concentration.

Improving the quality of sleep can help reduce fatigue. Watch your caffeine intake, especially before going to bed. Reduce TV and computer time. If you watch TV in the evening, choose relaxing, funny programs instead of programs with violent or disturbing content. Ask your doctor of chiropractic for other natural ways to help you sleep better.

Stress-managing strategies can also help address anxiety or depression issues. Cognitive therapy has been shown helpful in relieving fibromyalgia patients' negative emotions and depression by changing their perception of themselves and attitudes toward others.

A traditional gym-based or aerobic exercise program may exacerbate fibromyalgia symptoms and is not recommended. Instead, yoga, Pilates, or tai chi—which offer mild stretching, relaxation, and breathing techniques—may work better than vigorous exercise.

Chiropractic care has consistently ranked as one of the therapeutic approaches that offer the most relief for the fibromyalgia patient. Your doctor of chiropractic can also include massage therapy, ultrasound, and electrical stimulation in the treatment program, which may help relieve stress, pain, and other symptoms.

Your doctor of chiropractic has the knowledge, training, and expertise to help you understand your problem and, in many cases, to manage it successfully. Remember, however, that the treatment program can be successful only with your active participation. If your doctor of chiropractic feels that he or she cannot help you, you will be directed to another health care provider.