

What You Should Know About Fibromyalgia

Your whole body hurts. You're always tired. You feel cloudy and confused. Your arms and legs are numb. And then someone actually suggests to you that it's all in your head. If you have symptoms like these, it might be fibromyalgia. And it's not all in your head.

What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition that is characterized by widespread muscle pain, fatigue, and tender points—specific places on the body, usually areas on the neck, shoulders, back, hips, and near the elbows and knees, where even slight pressure causes sharp, severe pain. Other symptoms of fibromyalgia may include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Joint stiffness in the morning
- Severe headaches
- Stomach pain
- Frequent diarrhea and constipation
- Numbness or tingling in the arms and legs
- Trouble concentrating and remembering (sometimes referred to as “fibro fog”)
- Sensitivity to noise and changes in temperature
- Restless legs syndrome (unpleasant sensations and twitching in the legs, particularly at night)

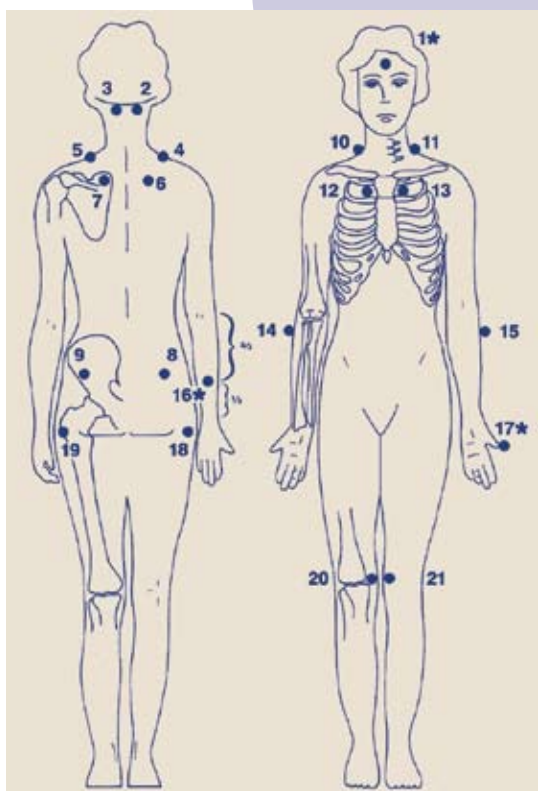
Who gets fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia affects about 1 in 50 Americans, and about 9 out of 10 of them are women. It tends to start in early or middle adulthood, but the condition can also develop in children and older adults. Fibromyalgia is more likely to develop in women who have a family member with the condition.

What causes fibromyalgia?

No one knows what causes fibromyalgia, but research is getting us closer to understanding what underlies its symptoms. It has been shown, for example, that people with fibromyalgia have increased levels of substance P, a chemical that helps transmit and intensify pain signals, in their spinal fluid. They also appear to have reduced levels of blood flow to the thalamus region of the brain, along with low levels of the neurotransmitters serotonin and tryptophan. So while the symptoms of fibromyalgia may indeed start with changes in your brain, they clearly are not “all in your head.”

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How is fibromyalgia diagnosed?

Fibromyalgia can be very difficult to diagnose. In fact, it has been estimated that it takes most patients with fibromyalgia 5 years to get an accurate diagnosis. The diagnosis is difficult to make because the main symptoms of the condition, pain and fatigue, can be present in many disease states. Complicating matters even more, there are currently no diagnostic laboratory or X-ray tests that will find fibromyalgia. (Unfortunately, this is also why doctors

sometimes reach the conclusion that the patient's pain is not "real.")

Because there is no test for fibromyalgia, doctors diagnose it by asking the patient about symptoms and carrying out a physical examination to look for symptoms that the American College of Rheumatology has specified as criteria for the diagnosis. These criteria include:

- Pain all over the body (that is, on both the right and left sides of the body and above and below the waist) for at least 3 months
- Pain in at least 11 of the 18 tender-point areas of the body
- Other signs or symptoms of fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia can be a very difficult condition to live with, but it may help you to know that it is not progressive, is never fatal, and does no damage to your body's organs.

Resources

- American College of Rheumatology
www.rheumatology.org
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
www.niams.nih.gov
- Arthritis Foundation
www.arthritis.org
- National Fibromyalgia Association
www.fmaware.org
- National Fibromyalgia Partnership, Inc.
www.fmpartnership.org

How is fibromyalgia treated?

There can be several components to a fibromyalgia treatment plan. Many people find that all of the following in combination are most helpful:

Medications. A new drug has been approved by the FDA for fibromyalgia that will be available soon. As of now, the most effective medications for fibromyalgia are several agents in the antidepressant class. They are effective in fibromyalgia because they correct levels of brain chemicals that are associated not only with depression, but with pain and fatigue as well. Analgesics (pain medications), like acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs may also help to relieve some of the pain of fibromyalgia.

Complementary and alternative therapies. Therapies such as massage, chiropractic treatments, and acupuncture have helped some people with fibromyalgia. However, these treatments have not been well researched.

Self-management. Self-care is very important to the treatment of fibromyalgia. Taking steps to reduce stress, getting enough sleep, and pacing yourself during the day can help with fibromyalgia symptoms. Although it may be painful at first, regular exercise has been found to be one of the most effective treatments for fibromyalgia.

Fibromyalgia can be a very difficult condition to live with, but it may help you to know that it is not progressive, is never fatal, and does no damage to your body's organs. It usually does not worsen with time, and in many people, it actually improves. The more you learn about your own unique symptoms, the more successful you are likely to be in managing them.