

Fibromyalgia



What is Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a relatively common condition affecting two per cent of Canadians. FM occurs more in women than in men. It is seen most in women older than 40, as the incidence of FM increases with age.



Although researchers initially thought the disease affected muscle tissue, we now know it is due to the impairment of pain processing mechanisms within the central nervous system. The preferred term today is “chronic widespread pain.”

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF FIBROMYALGIA?

Pain is the most common complaint of people with fibromyalgia. The pain of FM is widespread and felt throughout the body. Those with it are sensitive to firm pressure applied particularly to soft tissues, such as muscles and tendons. This increased sensitivity to pressure is felt as pain. Pressure that can cause pain may be as gentle as a friendly hug or the weight of a child climbing onto a lap. Being in pain makes it difficult to manage normal activities, such as maintaining a job and housekeeping, as well as recreational and other leisure pursuits.

Other symptoms of FM include feeling tired and weak, having disturbed sleep, difficulty with concentration, headaches, abdominal complaints, bladder dysfunction and sometimes excessive sensitivity to sounds, light, smell and medications. Many people with fibromyalgia feel discouraged; this may lead to depression and anxiety. In some cases, symptoms may come and go or they may be aggravated by additional stress or even at times by changes in the weather.

For many people, FM develops gradually and has no known cause. For others, FM may develop due to acute illness, a traumatic incident or a stressful, emotional experience. Researchers are still looking for what triggers FM.

Recent studies suggest that pain spreads abnormally in people with FM. It is possible that the nervous system is put into overdrive, causing pain. Nerve cells communicate with each other and the way these messages pass through the body is out of balance in people with FM; for this reason, the brain has difficulty understanding the message. Sometimes, however, pain is caused because the body's natural pain dampening mechanisms are not functioning properly.

HOW IS FIBROMYALGIA DIAGNOSED?

Although there is no test that can provide a specific diagnosis of FM, blood tests, X-rays and other tests may be requested by a physician to rule out some other condition that has similar symptoms.

HOW CAN I MANAGE FIBROMYALGIA?

There is no single treatment that works for everyone. Over time, most people with FM will find the balance of treatments that gives them the best relief. Although a complete resolution of all symptoms is seldom achieved, the aim should be to contain your symptoms as best as possible so that you continue leading an active and enjoyable life. Your first important step is to become an active participant in your treatment. You are encouraged to develop coping strategies to manage your FM.

While the symptoms of FM may persist over time, there are many steps you can take to help manage this condition:

1. Listen to, and respect, what your body is telling you, but always give yourself that little extra push.
2. Start an enjoyable exercise program, practice relaxation techniques and good sleeping habits. Take time for yourself and rediscover your interests.
3. Try the medications your doctor suggests. Make sure to discuss whether they are working for you.
4. Learn more about your condition and share that information with family and friends, so they can understand.
5. Keep a diary over several weeks. This can help to keep track of the connection between your FM symptoms and your daily activities, which can help you control your FM.

Non-medication therapies, such as physical activity (walking, low-impact aerobic programs, aquatic programs, using an exercise bike or treadmill), stress management and relaxation techniques, are a very important part of treating FM. While you can perform these activities on your own, it's best that you first ask a health-care professional, such as a physiotherapist or occupational therapist, for guidance.

WHAT MEDICATIONS ARE USED FOR FIBROMYALGIA?

The medical treatment of FM is best understood as “symptom-based” care. This means that you and your doctor should identify the symptoms that cause you greatest distress, keeping in mind that the key symptoms of FM are pain, sleep disturbance, mood disorder and fatigue. There are medications available for the management of the first three symptoms, but as yet there is no recommended treatment for fatigue. Medications exist for treating the symptoms of FM, namely pregabalin, which is an anti-convulsant drug, and duloxetine, a drug with anti-depressant properties. Please discuss the use of any medication with your health-care provider.

Pain-relieving medications

Pain-relieving medications called analgesics are used either periodically or on a more regular basis by most people with FM. Although acetaminophen is considered a mild analgesic and often takes the edge off pain, this medication should be used at the lowest dose for as short a period of time as possible, as it may have a potentially serious negative effect on liver function. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are generally not very effective for treating pain in FM; if NSAIDs are used, it should be for only a short period of time due to effects on your liver, stomach, intestines, heart and blood vessels.

Stronger painkillers, in the category of opioid medications, should only be prescribed by your physician with great caution, as many questions remain regarding the safety of these medications in the long term. If you're using an opioid to treat the pain of FM, it is important to ensure that the benefit of pain relief is not outweighed by negative side effects, such as drowsiness, difficulty concentrating and thinking, sleep disturbance, nausea, loss of appetite and constipation. To justify continued treatment with an opioid, there should be improvement in pain, as well as a clear improvement in function. About 15 per cent of people with FM report some pain relief with the use of stronger painkillers.

Anti-convulsant medications

This category of medications reduces pain by cooling down the activity of nerves that are fired up. They work similarly to a dimmer switch for a light bulb. The most common anti-convulsant medications are gabapentin and pregabalin. They are both safe medications without important side effects on major organs, such as the stomach, liver or kidney. The most common side effect of this category of medications is sleepiness. This can be an advantage when the medication is used at night and may help sleep disturbance, but can be troublesome during the day. If combined with alcohol or tranquilizers, however, the negative effect of unsteadiness or sleepiness may be exaggerated and could lead to harm.

Anti-depressant medications

Anti-depressant medications can be used to control pain and have shown success in treating FM. This group of medications act on pain by boosting the body's natural mechanisms that reduce pain. To date, the most effective medications for treating pain, fatigue and mood in people with FM are serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). Duloxetine falls into this category.

Medications affecting mood

Depression and anxiety are symptoms commonly associated with FM. When these symptoms are sufficiently severe to affect well-being, your doctor may decide to prescribe a medication that will improve your mood. Depending on the anti-depressant medication chosen, there may be the added effect of calming anxiety, promoting sleep or improving energy.

PROGNOSIS

The outcome of FM is not as gloomy as it was 20 years ago. Researchers and medical professionals have a better understanding of what causes the pain of FM. There are many treatment options, but a cure has not yet been found. Most people with FM are able to remain in the workforce and lead satisfying, fulfilling lives. Others may have more of a challenge with symptoms that are more difficult to control. Those who are active partners in their health management and remain positive and optimistic will be more successful in managing their FM.

Last revised: June 2010 by Mary-Ann Fitzcharles, MD, Ch.B (MRCP), UK, MRCP (C).

HOW CAN YOU FIGHT FIBROMYALGIA?

Call The Arthritis Society

This toll-free number can connect you with trained volunteers who can provide you with support and information.

1.800.321.1433

Join the Free Arthritis Registry

You will receive specific information you need to manage your arthritis and improve your quality of life.

www.arthritis.ca/registry

Enrol in the Arthritis Self-Management Program (ASMP)

Held over six weeks in weekly two-hour sessions, ASMP is led by trained instructors with first-hand experience of living with arthritis.

www.arthritis.ca/asmp

Use Arthritis Friendly Products

The Arthritis Society is proud to recognize manufacturers that have designed products that are easy to use for people living with arthritis. For a complete list of products that have been commended by The Arthritis Society and deemed “Arthritis Friendly,” visit

www.arthritis.ca/arthritisfriendly

Physical Activity

Staying physically active is important for treating fibromyalgia. For more information, consult The Arthritis Society's *Physical Activity & Arthritis guide*. This publication shows you the types of activity appropriate for treating your arthritis.

Healthy Eating

Healthy eating is a vital part of managing fibromyalgia. A balanced diet ensures you are getting proper nutrition and will help your body metabolize your medications. To learn more, read The Arthritis Society's *Nutrition & Arthritis* guide.

Both *Physical Activity & Arthritis* and *Nutrition & Arthritis* can be accessed at

www.arthritis.ca/publications

Walk to Fight Arthritis

Participate in or sponsor someone in The Arthritis Society's annual Walk to Fight Arthritis, presented by the makers of Tylenol®. For dates and locations, visit

www.WalkToFightArthritis.ca

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To support arthritis research or to learn more, contact The Arthritis Society:
1.800.321.1433 www.arthritis.ca


**The Arthritis
Society**