

# Fibromyalgia

## What is Fibromyalgia?

*Fibromyalgia (FM) is a chronic pain disorder that affects as many as 2-6% of Canadians. The term FM was created 20 years ago. Researchers believed that FM affected muscle tissue.*



*Today researchers believe that the pain is due to impairment of pain processing mechanisms within the central nervous system, rather than tissue damage. The preferred term today is "chronic widespread pain."*

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

FM occurs more often in women than in men. It is seen most in women older than 40, as the incidence of FM increases with age. It can also affect children and adolescents.

### **WHY DO PEOPLE GET FIBROMYALGIA?**

For many people, FM develops gradually with an unknown cause. For others, FM may develop due to acute illness, a traumatic incident or a stressful emotional experience. Researchers are still looking for the exact trigger that makes FM develop.

Recent studies suggest that pain spreads abnormally in people with FM. It is possible that the nervous system is put into overdrive, causing pain. For people with FM, the way that nerve cells communicate messages is out of balance. 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. This may occur in a number of locations throughout the body. Researchers have identified abnormalities in each of these areas, suggesting that there are many ways that pain caused by FM develops.

### **WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF FIBROMYALGIA?**

Pain is the most common and frequent symptom of FM. People with FM may feel tired and weak, have disturbed sleep, sensitivity to sound, light or cold, have difficulty concentrating, and experience depression and anxiety. In some cases, symptoms may come and go, or they may be aggravated by additional stress or changes in the weather.

Other conditions that accompany FM include migraine headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, bladder dysfunction, and lower jaw problems (TMJ).

Although there are similarities between FM and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), these

two conditions should be diagnosed and treated separately.

Many people with FM feel discouraged because of their pain. It is often difficult for family, friends and even medical professionals to understand the challenges of their symptoms. It can be a challenge to manage daily activities such as work, housekeeping, recreational and leisure activities due to pain and a lack of energy. This adds more stress, anxiety, and depression to the lives of some people with FM.

### **HOW DOES MY DOCTOR DIAGNOSE FIBROMYALGIA?**

People with FM have widespread pain throughout their body. When examined or touched near or on affected joints, like the inside of the knee area or around the back of the neck, it may feel tender and painful.

Physicians test for FM using their thumb, or a device called a dolorimeter, to determine the activity of tender points. In addition to widespread pain and tender spots, other symptoms are associated with FM. Although there is no test that can provide a specific diagnosis of FM, blood tests, X-rays and other tests are used first to rule out other conditions that may have similar symptoms.

## HOW CAN I MANAGE FIBROMYALGIA?

Every person's FM is different. Over time, you will find the balance of treatments that gives you the best relief. You and your health care team can create a treatment plan specifically for you.

### Lifestyle Management

Symptoms of FM may persist over time. There are many things you can do 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 and report back on their effectiveness.
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 to better control your FM.

### Getting Active

It is important to gradually improve your fitness level. Studies show that exercise can improve the pain symptoms of FM and improve your overall wellbeing. You are encouraged to find and commit to an exercise routine that is enjoyable and that works for you. Common activities include walking, low impact aerobic programs designed for people with arthritis, strength training, aquatic programs, using an exercise bike, or treadmill. Remember it's important to warm up before you exercise. To maximize the benefits of your routine, you should exercise at moderate intensity for 20 minutes a day at least three times a week. Moderate intensity means a level which your heart rate and breathing are increased but you are still comfortable. You should feel warm with some sweat. Any exercise program should be enjoyable and done regularly in order to be successful. **Be sure to consult your doctor about your exercise routine or if exercising is causing increased pain.**

### Relaxation Techniques

It is important to learn relaxation techniques since tension and tight muscles cause pain. You can participate in the Arthritis Self-Management Program, or you can ask your healthcare team to provide advice or assistance in learning new relaxation exercises.

### Medications

You should treat pain and sleep disturbance separately. Pain-relieving medication such as acetaminophen and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) should be used for short periods of time due to the potential negative effects high doses could have on your liver, stomach, intestines, heart and blood vessels.

Antidepressant medications which are used to control pain, instead of mood, have shown success in treating FM. They change the levels of chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine, which are all important in managing pain. The newer serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are helpful for pain management aside from their effect on your mood.

Antiepileptic agents calm down active nerves and work well for pain management. The most common medications are gabapentin and pregabalin. They are both safe medications but may cause sleepiness. Tranquilizers and muscle relaxants are also used to control FM. It is important to remember that tranquilizers can be addictive and should be used with caution.

### Complementary Therapies

Active participation in FM management is greatly encouraged and will have a significant impact on your overall health. Complementary techniques such as regular exercise, stress management, and relaxation can help you create a treatment strategy that is best for you. Some people with FM use alternative health therapies to help control their FM symptoms. **If you are using a complementary or natural product to treat your symptoms, be sure to tell all members of your healthcare team.** There is a need for a better understanding of these products to determine if they are beneficial.

Revised 04/08 -- By Mary-Ann Fitzcharles, M.D., Ch.B. (MRCP), UK, MRCP (C)

## WHAT CAN I EXPECT?

When you are an active partner in your health management, and remain positive and optimistic, you will be more successful in managing FM. There are many treatment options for people living with FM. Although researchers and medical professionals better understand what causes the pain of FM, the exact cause of the condition remains unknown, and a cure has yet to be discovered. Over time most people with FM are able to find a balance that is acceptable and their disease improves considerably. They remain in the workforce and lead satisfying, fulfilling lives. Others may have more of a challenge with symptoms that are difficult to control.

## 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](http://www.arthritis.ca/registry)**

### Enroll in the Arthritis Self-Management Program (ASMP)

ASMP is a six-week program for people living with arthritis, their family and friends. Trained leaders with first hand experience of arthritis lead the weekly small, interactive two-hour workshops. Program participants will gain self-confidence in their ability to control symptoms, learn how to develop action plans to manage how arthritis affects their lives, and make connections with others living with arthritis.  
**[www.arthritis.ca/asmp](http://www.arthritis.ca/asmp)**

### Use Arthritis Friendly Products

The Arthritis Society is proud to be able 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](http://www.arthritis.ca/arthritisfriendly)**.

**ARTHRITIS**  **FIGHT IT!**

To support arthritis research or to learn more, contact The Arthritis Society:  
1.800.321.1433 [www.arthritis.ca](http://www.arthritis.ca)

  
The Arthritis Society