

Fibromyalgia



Fibromyalgia

Diagnosis

There are no laboratory tests for fibromyalgia. Any physical cause for the pain of fibromyalgia just doesn't show up under current testing methods. And, since the main symptoms (generalized pain and fatigue) are vague, the only way to decide on a diagnosis of fibromyalgia is to eliminate other possible diagnoses first. After ruling out other conditions such as low thyroid, lupus, multiple sclerosis, or rheumatoid arthritis, doctors then use two criteria to arrive at a diagnosis: widespread pain lasting at least three months and pain at 11 or more of the 18 tender points on the body known to produce a sensation of pain if a small amount of pressure is applied.

Treatment

People diagnosed with fibromyalgia often find the best treatment situation is a pain clinic or a rheumatology clinic. Treatment teams may include doctors specializing in treating pain or rheumatic conditions as well as physical therapists, occupational therapists, and other specialists to help with both lifestyle changes and medications.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved new drugs that specifically treat the symptoms of fibromyalgia.

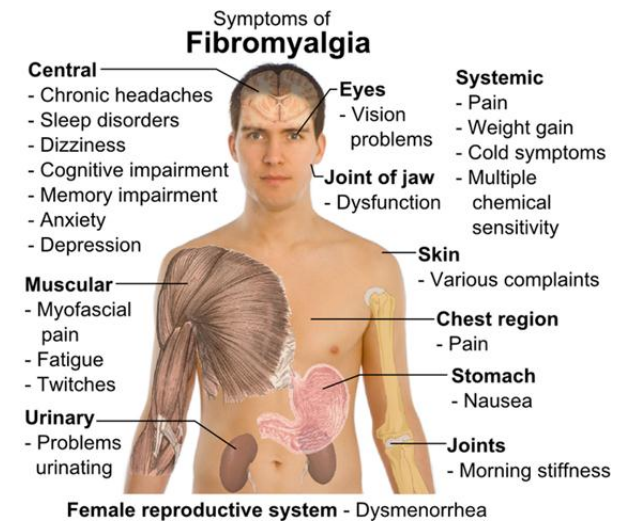
Many different medications, including antidepressants and pain medication, may have success with fibromyalgia pain.

Drugs that also show promise are anticonvulsants, drugs that are usually given for seizure and epilepsy. It relieves the pain of shingles and other nervous system disorders and seems to work against the pain of fibromyalgia as well.

Several lifestyle changes can help manage pain as well as improve the quality of life. Plenty of restful sleep and exercise could be powerful factors. Eating a healthy diet is always good. Stress reduction is extremely important, and maintaining a level pace of activity without strain also helps manage the symptoms of fibromyalgia.

Treatment of fibromyalgia will advance as we learn more about how the body processes pain and stress. One current study is assessing how well people cope with fibromyalgia in relation to how much in control of their lives they feel, how much support they perceive themselves receiving from significant others, and how much their pain interferes with their lives.

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Risk Factors

Being an adult female is the most common risk factor, although men and even children have been known to develop fibromyalgia. Other risk factors include having a rheumatic disease such as lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus), rheumatoid arthritis, or spinal arthritis (ankylosing spondylitis). Also, people who have other family members with fibromyalgia are more likely to have the disorder.

Possible Causes

The causes of fibromyalgia are not known yet. People with fibromyalgia seem to have an increased sensitivity to pain. The central nervous system is definitely involved. There often is an abnormally high level of a chemical called Substance P, which helps transmit and amplify pain signals, in the spinal fluid of fibromyalgia sufferers. The intensifying of pain signals seems to cause the brain's pain receptors, the neurons, to also become more sensitive. At present, no one knows what sets off this process in the first place.

Many people with fibromyalgia can trace the onset to a stressful event such as an accident, some strong emotional trauma, or an illness or infection.

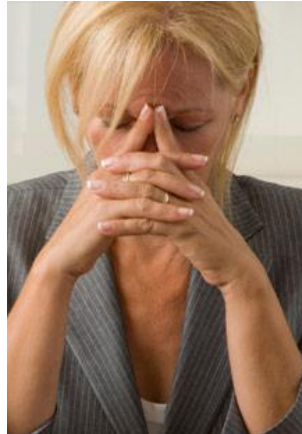
Genetics may be part of the cause. Researchers are investigating whether some people have genes that make them feel pain from certain stimuli, which people without that gene would not perceive.

Other researchers are investigating if certain characteristic disturbed sleep patterns may in fact be the cause and not the result of fibromyalgia.

What is Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is not a disease but a syndrome; a collection of symptoms that occur together. These symptoms include chronic muscle pain, fatigue, and tenderness at certain points on the body. Although fibromyalgia is considered a rheumatic condition, unlike arthritis it produces no inflammation and no damage to the joints or muscles. The good news is that it doesn't lead to any worse medical condition and is never fatal. The bad news is that it's hard to pin down and treatment is in the experimental stage.

Three to six million Americans suffer from fibromyalgia. Up to 90 % of sufferers are women, usually middle-aged and older.



Most Common Symptoms

Widespread pain and stiffness may last for months. Fatigue and inability to achieve deep sleep are also markers for fibromyalgia. These symptoms are indicators of other disorders and diseases, so it can be difficult to narrow a diagnosis down to fibromyalgia without first ruling out many other conditions

Fibromyalgia Symptoms

- * Fatigue
- * Sleeplessness or lack of deep sleep
- * Headaches
- * Irritable bowel syndrome
- * Irritable bladder
- * Cognitive and memory problems known as "fibro fog"
- * Temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJ, pain in the jaw and surrounding muscles)
- * Pelvic pain and painful menstrual periods
- * Numbness and/or tingling in arms or legs
- * Restless leg syndrome
- * Noise, light, or temperature sensitivity
- * Depression
- * Anxiety



Sources for this brochure include:

www.niams.nih.gov

www.rheumatology.org