



Fibromyalgia

## Fibromyalgia: Real or Imagined?

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### What is fibromyalgia?

The cause of fibromyalgia is unknown. It's believed that people who have this condition process pain differently, and that the way their brains recognize pain signals makes them overly sensitive to touch and other stimuli.

Living with fibromyalgia can be challenging. You may experience pain and fatigue that interferes with daily activity. But yet your family, friends, and even your doctor may not understand your concerns. Also, some people may not think fibromyalgia is a “real” condition and might believe symptoms are imagined.

Fibromyalgia is a real condition. It's estimated that 10 million Americans live with it. The disease can affect anyone including children. But it's more common in adults. And women are diagnosed with fibromyalgia 9 times more often than men.

There are many doctors that recognize fibromyalgia, although it cannot be recognized by diagnostic testing. They'll work with you to find a treatment to reduce your symptoms.

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### History

#### History of fibromyalgia

Some people believe fibromyalgia is a new condition, but it has existed for centuries. It was once considered a mental disorder. But in the early 1800s, it was classified as a rheumatoid disorder that caused stiffness, pain, fatigue, and difficulty sleeping.

Fibromyalgia tender points were discovered in the early 1820s. The condition was initially called fibrositis because many doctors believed pain was caused by inflammation throughout the body. It wasn't until 1976 that the condition was renamed fibromyalgia. The name was derived from the Latin word “fibro” (fibrosis tissue), and the Greek terms for “myo” (muscle) and “algia” (pain).

In 1990 the American College of Rheumatology established guidelines for diagnosing fibromyalgia. The first prescription medication to treat it became available in 2007.

### Symptoms

#### What are the symptoms of fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is grouped with other arthritis conditions, but it's important to know fibromyalgia is not a type of arthritis.

Arthritis causes inflammation and affects the joints. Fibromyalgia doesn't cause inflammation, and it doesn't damage muscles, joints, and tissues.

Widespread pain is one of the main symptom of fibromyalgia. This pain is often felt throughout the entire body and can be triggered by the slightest touch.

Other symptoms of fibromyalgia include:

- fatigue
- sleep problems, waking up not feeling refreshed
- widespread pain
- "fibro fog," an inability to focus
- depression
- headaches
- abdominal cramping

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## Diagnosis

### Diagnosing fibromyalgia

There is currently no diagnostic test to confirm fibromyalgia. Doctors diagnose it after ruling out other conditions. Having widespread pain and fatigue doesn't automatically mean you have fibromyalgia.

A doctor only makes a diagnosis if your symptoms match the criteria established by the American College of Rheumatology. To be diagnosed with fibromyalgia you must have widespread pain and other symptoms that last for three months or longer.

Pain typically occurs in the same spot on both sides of the body. Also, people living with fibromyalgia typically have up to 18 tender points over their body that are painful when pressed.

Doctors aren't required to conduct a tender points exam when making a fibromyalgia diagnosis. But your doctor may check these specific points during a physical exam.

### Road to diagnosis

Despite there being plenty of resources and information on fibromyalgia, some doctors aren't as knowledgeable about the condition. After completing a series of tests with no diagnosis, a doctor may wrongly conclude that your symptoms aren't real, or blame them on depression or stress.

Don't give up in your search for an answer if a doctor dismisses your symptoms. It sometimes takes on average more than two years to receive a proper diagnosis of fibromyalgia. But you can get an answer more quickly by working with a doctor who understands the condition, like a rheumatologist. A rheumatologist knows how to treat conditions that affect the joints, tissues, and muscles.

## Treatments

### Treatments for fibromyalgia

There are currently three prescription medications approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat pain in fibromyalgia:

- duloxetine (Cymbalta)

- milnacipran (Savella)
- pregabalin (Lyrica)

Some people don't require prescription medication. They're able to manage pain with over-the-counter pain relievers like ibuprofen and acetaminophen. Others have had success with alternative therapies, such as:

- massage therapy
- chiropractic care
- acupuncture

Lifestyle changes and home remedies have also proven effective. Some suggestions include:

### **Get plenty of sleep**

People with fibromyalgia often wake up feeling unrefreshed and have daytime fatigue. Improving your sleep habits may help you get a restful night's sleep and reduce tiredness.

Some things to try before bedtime include:

- avoiding caffeine before bed
- maintaining a cool, comfortable temperature in the room
- turning off the TV and radio
- avoiding stimulating activities before bed like exercising and playing video games

### **Exercise regularly**

Pain associated with fibromyalgia can make it difficult to exercise, but staying active is an effective treatment for the disease. However, you don't have to engage in strenuous activity.

Start slow by doing low-impact aerobics, walking, or swimming. Then slowly increase the intensity and length of your workouts.

### **Reduce stress**

Stress and anxiety can worsen symptoms of fibromyalgia. Learn stress management techniques such as deep breathing exercises and meditation to improve your symptoms.

You can also reduce your stress level by knowing your limitations and learning how to say "No." Listen to your body and rest when you're tired or overwhelmed.

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Support

## **Coping and support**

Even if you and your doctor recognize your symptoms, it can be difficult to make friends and family understand what you're going through. Many people don't understand fibromyalgia, and some may think the condition is imagined.

It can be challenging for those who don't live with the condition to understand your symptoms. But it's possible to educate friends and family.

Don't feel uncomfortable talking about your symptoms. If you can educate others on how the condition affects you, they might be more sympathetic.

If there are fibromyalgia support groups in the area, encourage friends or family members to attend a meeting. You can also provide them with printed or online information about the condition.

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## Outlook

### What is the outlook of fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a real condition that can interfere with daily activities. The condition is also chronic, so once you develop symptoms, they may continue.

The good news is that fibromyalgia doesn't damage your joints, muscles, or tissues. It is also not life-threatening.

Seek medical attention if you experience widespread pain that lasts for more than three months. With proper treatment and lifestyle changes, you can cope with the disease and relieve symptoms.

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