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Fibromyalgia

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Overview

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Fibromyalgia is a disorder characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain accompanied by fatigue, sleep, memory and mood issues. Researchers believe that fibromyalgia amplifies painful sensations by affecting the way your brain processes pain signals.

Symptoms sometimes begin after a physical trauma, surgery, infection or significant psychological stress. In other cases, symptoms gradually accumulate over time with no single triggering event.

Women are more likely to develop fibromyalgia than are men. Many people who have fibromyalgia also have tension headaches, temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety and depression.

While there is no cure for fibromyalgia, a variety of medications can help control symptoms. Exercise, relaxation and stress-reduction measures also may help.

Symptoms

Symptoms of fibromyalgia include:

- **Widespread pain.** The pain associated with fibromyalgia often is described as a constant dull ache that has lasted for at least three months. To be considered widespread, the pain must occur on both sides of your body and above and below your waist.
- **Fatigue.** People with fibromyalgia often awaken tired, even though they report sleeping for long periods of time. Sleep is often disrupted by pain, and many patients with fibromyalgia have other sleep disorders,

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such as restless legs syndrome and sleep apnea.

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- **Cognitive difficulties.** A symptom commonly referred to as "fibro fog" impairs the ability to focus, pay attention and concentrate on mental tasks.

Fibromyalgia often co-exists with other painful conditions, such as:

- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Migraine and other types of headaches
- Interstitial cystitis or painful bladder syndrome
- Temporomandibular joint disorders

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Causes

Doctors don't know what causes fibromyalgia, but it most likely involves a variety of factors working together. These may include:

- **Genetics.** Because fibromyalgia tends to run in families, there may be certain genetic mutations that may make you more susceptible to developing the disorder.
- **Infections.** Some illnesses appear to trigger or aggravate fibromyalgia.
- **Physical or emotional trauma.** Fibromyalgia can sometimes be triggered by a physical trauma, such as a car accident. Psychological stress may also trigger the condition.

Why does it hurt?

Researchers believe repeated nerve stimulation causes the brains of people with fibromyalgia to change. This change involves an abnormal increase in levels of certain chemicals in the brain that signal pain (neurotransmitters). In addition, the brain's pain receptors seem to develop a sort of memory of the pain and become more sensitive, meaning they can overreact to pain signals.

Risk factors

Risk factors for fibromyalgia include:

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- **Your sex.** Fibromyalgia is diagnosed more often in women than in men.
- **Family history.** You may be more likely to develop fibromyalgia if a relative also has the condition.
- **Other disorders.** If you have osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis or lupus, you may be more likely to develop fibromyalgia.

Complications

The pain and lack of sleep associated with fibromyalgia can interfere with your ability to function at home or on the job. The frustration of dealing with an often-misunderstood condition also can result in depression and health-related anxiety.

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By Mayo Clinic Staff

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