

**Recommended reading: Exercise for fibromyalgia**

This summary of a Cochrane review presents what we know from research about the effect of exercise for fibromyalgia. The review shows that in people with fibromyalgia:

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A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia [Internet]. Atlanta (GA): A.D.A.M.; 2013.

captured red 2/12/13

## Fibromyalgia

### Fibromyositis; Fibrositis

Last reviewed: February 2, 2012.

Fibromyalgia is a common syndrome in which a person has long-term, body-wide pain and tenderness in the joints, muscles, tendons, and other soft tissues.

Fibromyalgia has also been linked to fatigue, sleep problems, headaches, depression, and anxiety.

### Causes, incidence, and risk factors

The cause is unknown. Possible causes or triggers of fibromyalgia include:

- Physical or emotional trauma
- Abnormal pain response - areas in the brain that are responsible for pain may react differently in fibromyalgia patients
- Sleep disturbances
- Infection, such as a virus, although none has been identified

Fibromyalgia is most common among women aged 20 to 50.

The following conditions may be seen with fibromyalgia or mimic its symptoms:

- Chronic neck or back pain
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Depression
- Hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid)
- Lyme disease
- Sleep disorders

### Symptoms

Pain is the main symptom of fibromyalgia. It may be mild to severe.

- Painful areas are called tender points. Tender points are found in the soft tissue on the back of the neck, shoulders, chest, lower back, hips, shins, elbows, and knees. The pain then spreads out from these areas.
- The pain may feel like a deep ache, or a shooting, burning pain.
- The joints are not affected, although the pain may feel like it is coming from the joints.

People with fibromyalgia tend to wake up with body aches and stiffness. For some patients, pain improves during the day and gets worse at night. Some patients have pain all day long.

Pain may get worse with activity, cold or damp weather, anxiety, and stress.

Fatigue, depressed mood, and sleep problems are seen in almost all patients with fibromyalgia. Many say that they can't get to sleep or stay asleep, and they feel tired when they wake up.

Other symptoms of fibromyalgia may include:

- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Memory and concentration problems

- Numbness and tingling in hands and feet
- Reduced ability to exercise
- Tension or migraine headaches

## Signs and tests

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To be diagnosed with fibromyalgia, you must have had at least 3 months of widespread pain, and pain and tenderness in at least 11 of 18 areas, including

- Arms (elbows)
- Buttocks
- Chest
- Knees
- Lower back
- Neck
- Rib cage
- Shoulders
- Thighs

Blood and urine tests are usually normal. However, tests may be done to rule out other conditions that may have similar symptoms.

## Treatment

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The goal of treatment is to help relieve pain and other symptoms, and to help a person cope with the symptoms.

The first type of treatment may involve:

- Physical therapy
- Exercise and fitness program
- Stress-relief methods, including light massage and relaxation techniques

If these treatments do not work, your doctor may prescribe an antidepressant or muscle relaxant. The goal of medication is to improve sleep and pain tolerance. Medicine should be used along with exercise and behavior therapy. Duloxetine (Cymbalta), pregabalin (Lyrica), and milnacipran (Savella) are medications that are approved specifically for treating fibromyalgia.

However, many other drugs are also used to treat the condition, including:

- Anti-seizure drugs
- Other antidepressants
- Muscle relaxants
- Pain relievers
- Sleeping aids

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is an important part of treatment. This therapy helps you learn how to:

- Deal with negative thoughts
- Keep a diary of pain and symptoms
- Recognize what makes your symptoms worse
- Seek out enjoyable activities
- Set limits

Support groups may also be helpful.

Other recommendations include:

- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Avoid caffeine
- Practice good sleep routines to improve quality of sleep

- Acupressure and acupuncture

Severe cases of fibromyalgia may require a referral to a pain clinic.

### Expectations (prognosis)

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Fibromyalgia is a long-term disorder. Sometimes, the symptoms improve. Other times, the pain may get worse and continue for months or years.

### Calling your health care provider

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Call your health-care provider if you have symptoms of fibromyalgia.

### Prevention

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There is no known prevention.

### References

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Review Date: 2/2/2012.

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