

Fibromyalgia: Understanding and Management

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1 What is Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a chronic disorder in which the central nervous system amplifies pain signals, leading to widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, sleep issues, memory problems, and mood disturbances.

2 Common Symptoms

- **Widespread pain:** Burning, throbbing, or stabbing sensations in muscles and joints.
- **Fatigue and unrefreshing sleep,** even after long rest.
- **Cognitive dysfunction (“fibro-fog”):** Problems with concentration, memory, and multitasking.
- **Mood disorders:** Anxiety, depression, and PTSD often co-occur.
- **Other symptoms:** Headaches, jaw pain, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), stiffness, dizziness, sensitivity to temperature, and skin issues.

3 Causes and Risk Factors

- **Neurobiological central sensitization:** The nervous system overreacts to pain signals, increasing pain perception.
- **Genetic predisposition:** About 50% of vulnerability is genetic, linked to variations in neurotransmitter systems.
- **Environmental and psychological triggers:** Physical trauma, surgery, infection, emotional stress, or PTSD can trigger or worsen symptoms.
- **Comorbid conditions:** Often occurs with rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, ankylosing spondylitis, and IBS.
- **Demographics:** More common in women, especially between ages 20 and 60.

4 How It Is Diagnosed

- No specific lab or imaging tests; diagnosis is based on symptoms and ruling out other diseases.
- Diagnosis requires widespread pain and other symptoms for at least 3 months.
- Clinical evaluation includes history, physical exam, and tests to exclude other conditions.

5 Management and Treatment Strategies

5.1 Pharmacological Approaches

- Antidepressants (duloxetine, milnacipran) to reduce pain, fatigue, and improve mood.
- Anti-seizure medications (pregabalin) to modulate nerve pain.
- Non-opioid pain medications targeting central pain pathways.
- Opioids are not recommended due to limited benefit and risk.

5.2 Physical Exercise

- Aerobic exercise (walking, swimming, cycling) 2–3 times per week at moderate intensity.
- Resistance training twice weekly for at least 8 weeks to reduce pain and improve sleep.
- Avoid overexertion to prevent symptom flare-ups.

5.3 Psychological and Behavioral Therapies

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to improve coping skills and change pain perception.
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based therapies.
- Education, goal setting, pacing, and respecting personal limits.

5.4 Lifestyle and Complementary Treatments

- **Good sleep hygiene:** Consistent sleep schedule and restful environment.
- **Stress management:** Relaxation techniques, journaling, pacing daily activities.
- **Nutrition:** Magnesium-rich foods (nuts, seeds, greens, beans, whole grains) may help with pain and sleep.
- **Complementary therapies:** Acupuncture, massage, yoga, and hydrotherapy can reduce symptoms.

6 Practical Tips for Living with Fibromyalgia

- Build a multidisciplinary care team (doctor, physical therapist, mental health professional, sleep specialist).
- Track symptom triggers like stress, weather, sleep changes, or illness.
- Pace daily activities to balance activity and rest.
- Learn about the condition to improve self-management.
- Join support groups or counseling to reduce isolation and improve coping.
- Review treatment plans regularly and adjust as needed.