



Fibromyalgia information from the Michigan Medicine Chronic Pain and Fatigue Research Center

Fibromyalgia is a common health problem that causes widespread pain and tenderness (sensitivity to touch). The pain and tenderness tend to come and go and move about the body. Most often, people with this chronic (long-term) illness are fatigued (very tired) and have sleep problems. It can be hard to diagnose fibromyalgia.

Fast facts

- Fibromyalgia affects between 2 - 4 out of 100 people (2-4 percent), mostly women.
- There is no test to detect this disease, but you may need lab tests or X-rays to rule out other health problems.
- Doctors diagnose fibromyalgia based on all the patient's relevant symptoms (what you feel) no longer just on the number of “tender points” during an examination.
- There is no cure for fibromyalgia, but medications and non-medication treatments can relieve symptoms.
- Patients also may feel better with proper self-care, such as exercise and getting enough sleep.

What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a chronic health problem that causes pain all over the body and other symptoms such as:

- Tenderness to touch or pressure affecting joints and muscles

- Fatigue
- Sleep problems (waking up unrefreshed)
- Problems with memory or thinking clearly

Some patients may also have:

- Depression or anxiety
- Migraine or tension headaches
- Digestive problems including Irritable Bowel Syndrome (commonly called IBS) or Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (often referred to as GERD)
- Irritable or overactive bladder
- Pelvic pain
- Temporomandibular disorder—often called TMJ (a set of symptoms including face or jaw pain, jaw clicking, and ringing in the ears)

Symptoms of fibromyalgia and its related problems can vary in intensity and will wax and wane over time. Stress often worsens the symptoms.

What causes fibromyalgia?

The causes of fibromyalgia are unclear. They may be different in different people. Fibromyalgia may run in families. There likely are certain genes that can make people more prone to getting fibromyalgia and the other health problems that can occur with it. Genes alone, though, do not cause fibromyalgia.

There is most often some triggering factor that sets off fibromyalgia. It may be spine problems, arthritis, injury, or another type of physical stress. Emotional stress also may trigger this illness. The result is a change in the way the body

"talks" with the spinal cord and brain. Levels of brain chemicals and proteins may change. For the person with fibromyalgia, it is as though the "volume control" is turned up too high in the brain's pain processing centers.

Who gets fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is most common in women, though it can occur in men. It most often starts in middle adulthood (between the ages of 45 to 65) but can occur in the teen years and in old age. Younger children can also develop widespread body pain and fatigue.

You are at higher risk for fibromyalgia if you have a rheumatic disease such as osteoarthritis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, or ankylosing spondylitis.

How is fibromyalgia diagnosed?

A doctor will suspect fibromyalgia based on your symptoms. Doctors may require that you have tenderness to pressure or "tender points" at a specific number of certain spots before saying you have fibromyalgia, however, the diagnosis is also based on other symptoms and their duration. A physical exam can be helpful to detect tenderness and exclude other causes of muscle pain.

There are no diagnostic tests (such as X-rays or blood tests) to diagnose fibromyalgia. Yet, you may need tests to rule out another health problem that can be confused with fibromyalgia.

Because widespread pain is the main feature of fibromyalgia, health care providers will ask you to describe your pain. This may help tell the difference between fibromyalgia and other diseases with similar symptoms. For instance, hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland) and polymyalgia rheumatica sometimes mimic fibromyalgia. Certain blood tests can tell if you have either of these problems. Sometimes, fibromyalgia is confused with rheumatoid arthritis

or lupus. But, again, there is a difference in the symptoms, physical findings, and blood tests that will help your health care provider detect these health problems. Unlike fibromyalgia, these rheumatic diseases cause inflammation in the joints and tissues.

How is fibromyalgia treated?

There is no cure for fibromyalgia. However, symptoms can be treated with both medication and non-drug treatments. Many times the best outcomes are achieved by using multiple types of treatments.

Medications:

A number of medicines can help relieve the pain and improve sleep. Your doctor may prescribe more than one type of medication at the same time.

- **Antidepressants.** Drugs that treat depression may also work for fibromyalgia even if you are not depressed. Doctors may prescribe one of several classes of antidepressants.
- **Anti-seizure medicines.** These medicines can lessen pain and improve sleep. They work by interfering with the transmission of pain signals to the brain.
- **Analgesics (pain-relieving medicines).** These may be used for people who need additional pain relief. Anti-inflammatory pain medications are usually not effective because fibromyalgia does not cause tissue inflammation, but they may help with other painful conditions that may coexist with fibromyalgia

Non-medication therapies

- **Activity/exercise.** A key aspect of fibromyalgia management is for the patient to assess whether their symptoms decrease in response to medications and their activity/function increase accordingly. For example, when medications diminish pain, fatigue, or other symptoms by 20%, this

should lead to a 20% increase in activity/function. The increase in function and activity may result in a continuing reduction in pain, fatigue, and other symptoms. It may also diminish associated depressive and anxiety symptoms.

Where can I learn more about Fibromyalgia?

Web Resources

- The Pain Guide at: <https://painguide.com/>. We strongly recommend this website which was developed by our colleagues at the Michigan Medicine Chronic Pain and Fatigue Research Center. Clinical trials have shown that an earlier version of the website has been effective to reduce pain. This website works best if a provider gives specific recommendations about what to do on the website and even give specific homework for patients to do between visits.
- The Michigan Medicine Chronic Pain and Fatigue Research Center <http://www.med.umich.edu/painresearch/index.htm>

Fibromyalgia workshop

We urge patients to attend one of our monthly educational programs designed to provide fibromyalgia patients with state-of-the-art information about this syndrome, and guidance regarding the development of personalized symptom-management strategies. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all in-person fibromyalgia seminars have been canceled, but the recordings of previous workshops are available online at:

- Chronic Pain - Is it All in Their Head? is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0EhNajqkDU>
- Contemporary Approaches to Treating Chronic Pain is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1OXVVhBDII>

Access <http://www.med.umich.edu/painresearch/about/workshops.html> for current information about the workshops.

At the workshops, Dr. Clauw presents an overview of the science behind fibromyalgia and other chronic multi-symptom illnesses, such as chronic fatigue, and irritable bowel syndrome. He also discusses the influence of cognition and behavior on the illness experience and details several self-management strategies that may help minimize fibromyalgia symptoms, such as graduated aerobic exercise and activity pacing.

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Adapted from: American College of Rheumatology. Fibromyalgia. Access at:
<https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver/Diseases-Conditions/Fibromyalgia>

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