

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Fibromyalgia summary

**We all get aches and pains from time to time. But if you have long-term widespread pain across your whole body, you may have a condition called fibromyalgia. Although there are treatments that may help, there's no cure for fibromyalgia. You may need to try different treatments to see what helps you most.**

We've brought together the research about fibromyalgia and talked to experts about the best way to treat it. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

## What is fibromyalgia?

It's common to get aches and pains, especially if you're feeling tired and run down, or if you've been ill. But for some people, pain becomes a daily experience, even though there's nothing physically wrong with their muscles or joints to cause the pain. This condition is called fibromyalgia.

We don't know exactly what causes fibromyalgia. People with fibromyalgia may have a faulty central nervous system, so they feel more pain than other people. Our nerves send pain signals from around our body to our brain, which makes sense of them and decides how much importance to give them. It may be that in fibromyalgia, something makes the brain too sensitive to these pain signals. So you feel more pain than other people from everyday sensations.

Many people get fibromyalgia without ever knowing why. But some people say they get it after a painful experience, such as being injured in a car accident, or having a serious illness or major emotional upset, for example a divorce.

It is most common in women between the ages of 20 and 60, with the most common starting age being 35. Only 1 in 10 people with fibromyalgia are men. Rarely, this condition affects children. It seems to run in families, so it may be partly because of the genes you inherit from your parents.

## What are the symptoms?

The most obvious symptom is long-term pain. People with fibromyalgia feel pain all over their body, on both sides, front and back, and above and below the waist. You might have joint pain, muscle pain, or both. Doctors say the pain is long-term if it's lasted three months or more.

Doctors diagnose fibromyalgia by asking about your pain, and examining you. Usually, doctors don't diagnose fibromyalgia unless you've had widespread pain for three months or more. They will press certain points on your body to see if they are more painful than they should be. There are 18 tender points around the body that doctors check. If 11 or more of them are painful, you may be diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

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You won't need any other tests to see if you have fibromyalgia. However, your doctor may suggest you have other tests if he or she thinks you might have another illness as well. Or you might need tests if your doctor doesn't think you have fibromyalgia and wants to find out what else might be causing your pain.

People with fibromyalgia often have other illnesses as well. More than 9 in 10 people with fibromyalgia feel very tired most of the time. This condition is sometimes called chronic fatigue syndrome. It's also quite common to have stomach problems, such as diarrhoea, constipation, stomach pain and bloating. This is called irritable bowel syndrome. Some women also have a sensitive, painful bladder, and need to urinate very often. This condition is called interstitial cystitis.

You may find it hard to get to sleep at night, or find your sleep unrefreshing. Some people with fibromyalgia say they find it hard to concentrate and think properly. This might be because of tiredness.

With all these difficulties, it's not surprising that many people with fibromyalgia become depressed or anxious. People with fibromyalgia are much more likely to have depression or anxiety than other people.

### What treatments work?

There are a number of treatments that may help you cope better with your fibromyalgia. However, there is no cure that will get rid of it altogether. With treatment, most people find their symptoms gradually improve. But you may find they come and go.

Treatments include things you can do for yourself, such as taking gentle exercise and improving your chances of a good night's sleep. Some people also take medicines, which may help with the pain. Other treatments include a type of talking therapy, which may help you cope with your symptoms better. Some studies show that combining treatments – for example, doing an exercise programme and having a talking treatment – may work best.

The treatments you are offered will vary, depending on where you live and what your doctor thinks is likely to help. We've described some of the common treatments below. You can use this information to talk to your doctor about your treatment choices.

### Things you can do for yourself

**Exercise** may be the last thing you feel like doing. But studies show that gentle aerobic exercise, such as walking or exercising in a warm swimming pool, can help you feel better overall. Exercise may also make you fitter, which may help you feel better. Although you can exercise safely by yourself, you may feel worse if you overdo it. Some people take part in graded exercise programmes, working with a therapist who has experience of treating people with fibromyalgia. They can help you exercise without wearing yourself out.

If you want to try exercising alone, start with five minutes of gentle walking every day. Build up by one minute a day, until you are able to walk for at least 30 minutes daily. If

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you want to exercise in a swimming pool, you could follow this programme with gentle swimming.

Exercise may help you sleep better. Better sleep may help you feel less tired, and that can reduce your pain.

**Getting enough sleep** can make a big difference to how you feel. Here are some tips to help you sleep better:

- Go to bed at the same time every day, so your body gets into the habit of regular sleep
- Avoid napping during the daytime
- Make sure your bedroom is cool, comfortable, dark and quiet
- Get out of bed if you can't fall asleep or you're not tired
- Only go to bed to sleep or have sex, not to watch television
- Don't eat, drink or exercise just before you go to bed
- Avoid drinking caffeine late in the day
- Don't drink too much alcohol. It may help you get to sleep, but you'll probably wake up again and your sleep quality won't be as good.

### Talking treatments

A treatment called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) aims to help you feel more positive about life, and give you new ways of coping with your condition. If you have CBT, you meet a therapist regularly to talk about your outlook on life and help you change negative ways of thinking.

Many people wonder whether a talking treatment can really make a difference to physical symptoms like pain. But some studies show that CBT may help people with fibromyalgia:

- Feel less tired
- Feel more positive about life
- Get on with life, for example have a social life, follow hobbies or get back to work.

We don't know exactly how it works. But in studies, people with fibromyalgia who had CBT said they slept better. Better sleep may help you feel less tired, and that can reduce your pain.

### Medicines

There are a number of medicines used to reduce fibromyalgia pain and help people sleep. You may need to try several treatments before you find one that helps you. Remember that medicines often have unwanted side effects. Ask your doctor about side effects when you're deciding on treatment.

**Tricyclic antidepressants** are often used as pain relief, even for people who aren't depressed. Studies show they work for about 1 in 3 people with fibromyalgia. They may help you sleep better, and reduce your pain. Types of tricyclic antidepressants often used

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for fibromyalgia are **amitriptyline** and **cyclobenzaprine**. Side effects of tricyclic antidepressants include dry mouth, drowsiness, dizziness and stomach problems.

Other antidepressants, called **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors** (SSRIs) are also used for fibromyalgia. These include **fluoxetine**.

Painkillers like **paracetamol**, **aspirin** and **ibuprofen** are not helpful for most people with fibromyalgia.

A painkiller called **tramadol** does help reduce pain for some people with fibromyalgia. It's a type of medicine called an opioid. It also works in a similar way to some antidepressants. Side effects of tramadol include dizziness, sleepiness, stomach problems and headache. Because it is a strong painkiller, some people worry that you could get addicted to it.

**Anticonvulsant medicines**, which are more often used for epilepsy, help some people with fibromyalgia. The two drugs used are **pregabalin** and **gabapentin**. These medicines often have side effects, including dizziness, sleepiness and weight gain.

### Alternative treatments

These are sometimes called 'mind-body' therapies. Below, we list some therapies that studies have shown may be helpful:

**Biofeedback** is a technique to help you feel in control of your body. It uses electrical monitoring equipment to demonstrate how fast your heart is beating (heart rate variability biofeedback) or how tense your muscles are (electromyograph biofeedback). The monitoring equipment makes beeps, or flashes lights, to show how much electrical activity it's picking up. You learn to control your heart rate or relax your muscles through breathing and relaxation exercises. When you do this, the beeps or lights get slower or quieter, so you can see what effect you are having on your heart or muscles.

**Guided imagery** means listening to a recorded message about half an hour long, which asks you to imagine pleasant situations or sights. For example, you might be asked to imagine yourself lying on a beautiful beach on a tropical island. It helps you relax and think about things other than your pain.

**Hypnosis** means having a session with a therapist where they talk you into a state of deep relaxation, similar to sleep. While you are in this state, the hypnotist can make suggestions that may help you manage your pain or feel better about your condition.

### What will happen to me?

Most people with fibromyalgia find their symptoms get better over time. But it is a long-term condition. You may find your symptoms come and go. You'll probably have good days and bad days. The aim of treatment is to help you manage your symptoms, so that you feel less pain and you are able to get on with your life.

Although fibromyalgia can make you feel very miserable, it may help to know that it's not a life-threatening disease. And it's not a sign of damage to your joints or muscles.

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Understanding your pain may help you worry about it less, and this may reduce the amount of pain you feel.

Fibromyalgia is quite rare in children, although it does sometimes happen. Happily, children are more likely to recover completely from fibromyalgia.

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