

## FIBROMYALGIA

Fibromyalgia itself is not a disease in itself, but the term is used to describe people complaining of widespread aches and pains in the muscles and joints throughout the body, combined with sleep disturbance and fatigue. The problem is four times more common in women than in men, and the usual age of onset is between 30 and 40.

Clinical tests such as x-rays, blood tests and muscle biopsies are usually all normal. Fibromyalgia is a benign condition in that it does not lead to any permanent damage or arthritis. In most cases it is self-limiting.

### What causes Fibromyalgia?

The cause of fibromyalgia is unknown, but latest scientific theories suggest that the primary problem lies within the central nervous system where there is a problem of central pain processing. In this overly sensitive state there is a lowered threshold to painful stimuli. Thus, the muscles and joints ache in response to seemingly mild stress and trauma.

In some cases it is thought that fibromyalgia may be triggered by viral illnesses, psychological stress, sleep deprivation or trauma. Other theories suggest that it may arise following irritable or inflammatory bowel disease.

### What are the symptoms?

1. **Pain:** This seems to originate most often in the spine, particularly from around the shoulder girdle, and to a lesser extent from the back and the arms. The pain is usually of a deep aching quality, but also burning and tingling may be felt. Usually the pain is over a wide area of the body and may vary from day to day.
2. **Stiffness:** Muscle and joint stiffness often may accompany the pain, often worse in the morning.
3. **Fatigue and sleep disturbance:** The sleep disturbance of fibromyalgia can be prominent and may by itself cause the condition to persist. One study has demonstrated that quality sleep is important for pain control. A group of people without pain were woken regularly during their normal sleep time for a few weeks. By the end of this period it was observed that pain was developing in the shoulders and neck due to a reduction in the deep part of sleep.
4. **Other symptoms:** Swelling of the hands and fingers, weakness of the hands, headaches, temperature and colour changes in the hands and feet, are all symptoms that can occur in association with fibromyalgia. Irritable bowel syndrome is also common.

### Treatment:

As the underlying cause of fibromyalgia is not definitely known, there is no simple cure. However, a combined approach is often successful in the long term. Much of the pain can come from fear and anticipation of pain.

### Sleep disturbance:

If sleep disturbance is prominent in fibromyalgia it should be treated. The best ways to improve sleep quality is by the use of psychological methods such as counselling, relaxation, hypnotherapy, yoga, Feldenkrais, etc. Acupuncture may be worth a try. A

## Comprehensive spinal and joint care

Melbourne psychologist David Morowitz has put together an audio tape and booklet entitled "Sleep Better Without Drugs".

### **Herbal remedies**

These include Valerian and St. Johns Wort ("Elezac"). St Johns Wort has been investigated in some small trials and shown to be of some benefit in helping regulate sleep patterns.

Controlled studies have shown that a low dose regime of Amitriptyline is effective in the management of chronic pain states that are associated with sleep disturbance. Amitriptyline, (Tryptanol) an anti-depressant, is most commonly used. It is not used as an anti-depressant, but to help regulate sleep and pain. In fibromyalgia low doses are used in the order of 5-75mgs at night.

Often people with a sleep disorder use tranquilising pills such as Valium and Serepax, and sleeping pills such as Mogadon. The problem with these drugs is that they tend to produce shallow sleep. In fibromyalgia the use of these drugs for sleep control can produce better sleep, but clinical trials have not shown reduction of pain. In addition, these drugs can be addictive.

**Physical therapy:** In some cases the underlying triggering factor leading to fibromyalgia is a physical injury and in these cases physical therapy to the spine in the form of massage, mobilisation and stretching type exercises can be very helpful. Other types of treatment that are used include Feldenkrais, yoga and acupuncture. Physical therapy alone often will give temporary improvement, but needs to be combined with other strategies.

**Exercise:** It has now been proven that graduated aerobic type exercise is the best approach to managing fibromyalgia. In one study, 83% of those engaging in a fitness training program lowered their levels of pain and improved their muscle strength and endurance. The minimum suggested is 30 minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week. Initially there may be worsening of pain and fatigue until the body adapts, thus exercise needs to be introduced in a progressive and controlled manner. Flexibility is also essential in the recovery of people with fibromyalgia, especially those with local fibromyalgia that affects the back or neck. It is important to understand that the pain felt is not due to ongoing tissue damage or injury, even though the pain is real.

**Diet:** There have been some case reports of patients improving with avoidance of certain foods. About one third of patients with inflammatory arthritis respond to diet, but no studies have been done on fibromyalgia. The most common foods that affect the musculoskeletal system are: milk and dairy products, gluten (wheat products including bread, cakes), solanins (potato, tomato, chilli, capsicum, eggplant etc.) Elimination only needs to be for 7-10 days unless there is associated inflammatory arthritis, when it may take 3 weeks to clear. Challenge with the foods one at a time is of course necessary to clarify the result. It is worth trying an elimination diet if you have abdominal symptoms in particular.

**Nutritional supplements:** Although not proven, there are many natural remedies reported to help fibromyalgia. None have been proven to be of benefit. Those with irritable bowel syndrome (about one third of fibromyalgia patients) may benefit from change in diet or multivitamin and mineral formulas.

**Program:** Brighton Spinal Group does have a specific program for those not responding to the usual conservative measures. Talk to your therapist about this.