

Managing body pain caused by fibromyalgia

Department of Rheumatology

Information for Patients

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What is fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia causes pain and tenderness all over the body. Doctors do not fully understand why, even though lots of research has been done. Sometimes there is a clear reason for the symptoms, but for most people it starts slowly without a known cause.

A vicious cycle of events can occur:

- You may sleep badly because of pain. We know that if people do not get into deep sleep, their muscles cannot relax properly. This raises muscle tension even when resting.
- This leads to aching all over. It then makes it harder to sleep the next night. This causes more muscle problems.
- You may feel tired even after resting. If you nap during the day it can stop you getting deep sleep at night, making things worse.
- This becomes a vicious cycle that's very hard to get out of.

Why does it hurt so much?

Research shows that patients with fibromyalgia may have low levels of certain brain chemicals. These chemicals affect how patients feel pain.

For example, a light touch or small movements can feel painful, cause numbness or pins and needles. But there is no physical problem to explain it that we can fix.

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What are the symptoms?

People with fibromyalgia may:

- have pain: all over your body. Mainly in places like your neck and back. See the diagram of trigger/ tender points on page 4.
- notice clicking joints
- feel tired (fatigue) all the time.
- sleep badly. You may wake up feeling like you have not had any rest.
- ache and have stiffness. It often feels worse during or after you have been active.

It is common for your condition to flare-up, making your symptoms suddenly worse.

Fibromyalgia can also cause:

- forgetfulness or poor concentration.
- stress, worry or low mood.
- tingling, numbness or swelling of your hands and feet.
- headaches.
- restless legs syndrome: a tingling, uncomfortable feeling in your legs, mainly at night.
- irritability, or feeling low or weepy.
- needing to pee often, especially at night.
- painful menstrual periods.
- diarrhoea, constipation and stomach pain: sometimes separately diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).
- more sensitive to things like cold, sound, knocks and bumps.
- tender joints and muscles.

Pain may affect the whole body or just a few areas.

It can get worse in extreme temperatures, when it is very hot or cold, or in damp weather.

For some people fatigue is the worst part. It can make it hard to think clearly or remember things. This is sometimes called fibro fog or brain fog.

Treatment and managing your symptoms

Painkillers may help but they do not always work well.

Sometimes low doses of medication such as nortriptyline, amitriptyline, pregabalin, gabapentin, duloxetine and fluoxetine may help. These medications may also be used for treatment of depression. In this case, we may use them to also help with pain in fibromyalgia.

These drugs have an effect on some of the brain chemicals (neuro-transmitters) which can help to lower pain a lot.

It is important to be realistic about their possible benefits. If they do not help, we would need to stop them. Many patients still describe their pain score as 10 out of 10, despite being on 4 medications for pain, which can have harmful side effects.

The best approach is to stay fit and active as much as you can. If you do not do enough exercise the condition usually gets worse.

Aerobic exercise can help to get a more refreshing sleep pattern.

Physiotherapy can help you follow a safe and regular exercise programme.

Tai chi, pilates and yoga can also help.

Studies have shown that mindfulness/ mind–body therapy has also been found to be useful.

It is important that you pace yourself in any activity that you try. You need to rest after activity to get a balance. Do not over do it or push yourself too hard. If you do not pace yourself, it could slow down your progress in the long term.

Another treatment is a type of talking therapy called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). If you would like to look at this talk to your GP.

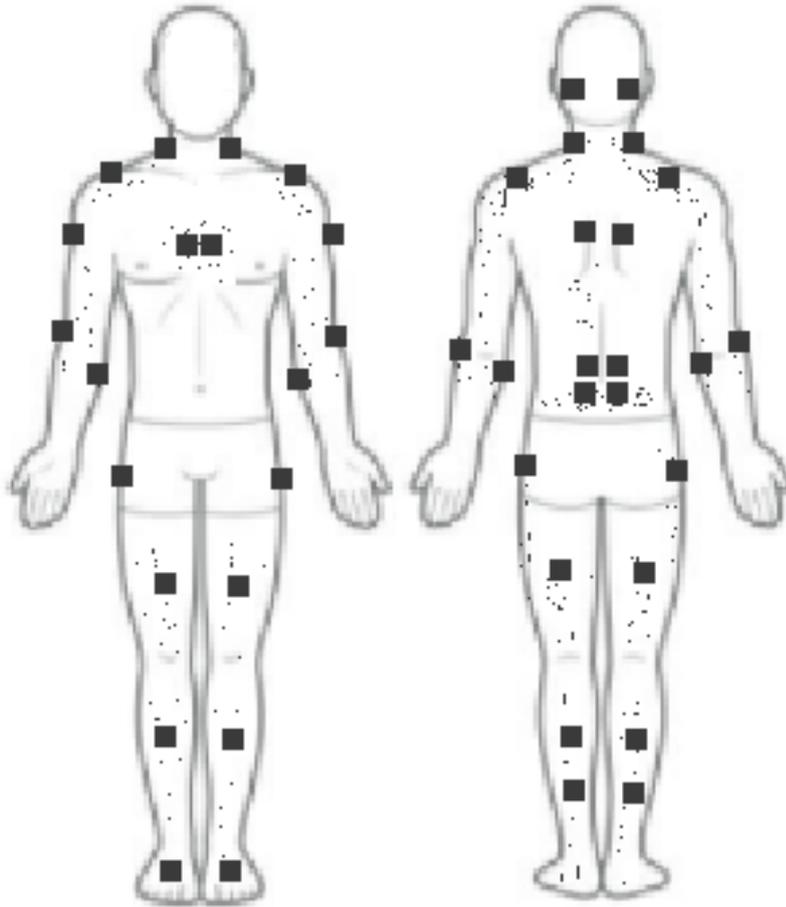
Further information

The sources below provide a useful understanding of the condition and how best to manage it to improve your health:

- www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-45369402/fibromyalgia-like-red-hot-lava-radiating-through-my-body
- www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/conditions/fibromyalgia/
- <https://fibroguide.med.umich.edu/> :developed by a team at University of Michigan and led by a world expert in fibromyalgia.
- www.bodyreprogramming.org/ :this is a new intervention provided by colleagues in Plymouth and it continues to be developed with help from patients.
- www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/ :developed by Torbay and South Devon NHS trust to help fibromyalgia patients get back a good quality of life.

Trigger/ tender points

People with fibromyalgia often have tender spots on their body. These areas feel sore when pressed. You can see the spots in the diagram below



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