

Fibromyalgia

The Syndrome of Total Body Pain



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Have you or has someone you know been suffering from diffuse pain seemingly all over the body? Such pain can occur in the muscles of the arms, shoulders, neck, low back, legs, feet, and even in joints such as the elbows and wrists. This pain may also be accompanied by difficulty getting restful sleep, chronic fatigue, intermittent loose stools, depression, and even heart palpitations. If these symptoms sound all too familiar, then you may be suffering from fibromyalgia.

Fibromyalgia is a mysterious syndrome causing diffuse body pain, as noted above, associated with various medical conditions such as insomnia, chronic fatigue, migraine headache, depression, irritable bowel syndrome, and mitral valve prolapse of the heart. Although neither the pain itself nor the

associated disorders are life threatening, fibromyalgia can be a debilitating disorder that can lead to severe limitations in physical activity, general poor quality of life, and even total disability from work.

Although there are different theories as to its cause, science does not know exactly what leads people to develop fibromyalgia. What we do know is that approximately two percent of the population suffer from it. It also affects women seven times more commonly than men. It seems to occur in association with other illnesses and injuries. For instance, 10 percent to 40 percent of those with lupus and 10 percent to 30 percent of those with rheumatoid arthritis develop the condition. Furthermore, 10 percent to 25 percent of those with lyme disease develop fibromyalgia—even after the disease is treated with antibiotics. A study done by Israeli scientists found that 22 percent of people who suffered a whiplash injury develop fibromyalgia.

Although the hallmark of fibromyalgia is severe diffuse muscle pain, fibromyalgia is actually not thought to be a muscle disorder. Indeed, in studies of muscle biopsies taken from fibromyalgia sufferers, no consistent abnormalities of the muscles can be found. Rather, science is increasingly defining it as a syndrome of abnormally

heightened perception of pain, most likely caused by neurochemical central nervous system abnormalities. Scientists suspect this because certain hormones and neurotransmitters are found in abnormal quantities in fibromyalgia patients. These include low levels of human growth hormone, low levels of serotonin, a brain neurotransmitter with a role in pain perception, and increased levels of substance P, a neurotransmitter responsible for transmitting pain signals in the brain. Interestingly, these neurochemical abnormalities are also commonly seen in both sleep disorder and depression. This could help explain why all of these disorders are commonly found together.

There is no one treatment that is universally effective in all fibromyalgia patients. Rather, treatment must be individualized. Typically, patients respond best to a multi-disciplinary treatment approach. Medications are used to block the pain, improve sleep quality, and fight depression, if present. Physical therapy emphasizing increasing aerobic capacity coupled with cognitive-behavioral therapy to teach pain-blocking exercises are also integral parts of the program. Using this combination approach, the vast majority of fibromyalgia patients can look forward to days of less pain, increased function, and a significantly improved quality of life.